

Bird Flu

Frequently asked questions



H5N1 Avian Influenza

Q) What is bird flu?

A) Avian influenza, also called bird flu, is a disease of birds that is found primarily in wild waterfowl such as ducks, geese and swans. Sometimes, this disease can also spread from wild birds into domestic poultry. There are many strains or types of bird flu. Right now there is a type of bird flu called Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) type H5N1 (also called H5N1 bird flu) that has made many birds and a few people sick elsewhere in the world.

Q) Is the highly pathogenic avian influenza, H5N1 bird flu present in the United States?

A) No, this type of bird flu has not been found in the United States. Other strains of bird flu are commonly found in wild waterfowl in the United States, but usually affect small numbers of birds and generally do not cause obvious illness. These other types of bird flu are not considered a human health risk. The H5N1 bird flu is now circulating in Asia, Europe and Africa.

Q) Can pets get bird flu?

A) Yes. In some places where H5N1 bird flu has occurred, cats and other mammals have gotten sick and died after eating infected birds.

Q) Can my pets get vaccinated against bird flu?

A) No. But there are things you can do to protect your pet.

Q) What can I do to protect my pets from bird flu?

A) If you are worried about your pets, do not let them roam outside where they could be exposed to, or eat the remains of sick or dead wildlife. Many diseases can cause wild birds and other animals to get sick and die, and some diseases could be spread to pets that run free.

Q) My pet has been exposed to a dead bird, can my pet be tested?

A) Routine testing of pets for bird flu is not necessary and currently unavailable. If you have concerns about your pet's health, it is best to contact a veterinarian.

Q) Can my pet give me bird flu?

A) There have been no confirmed cases of bird flu transmission between humans and pets. If H5N1 bird flu occurs in our country, it will be important to protect pets from possible exposure to sick birds and wildlife so that they will not get infected.

Q) How do I know that animals from a pet store don't have bird flu?

A) It's always best to make sure your pet has been checked by a veterinarian prior to purchase. There have been no confirmed cases of bird flu being transmitted from pets to humans.

Q) Are you going to test dead wild birds for bird flu?

A) Currently, certain wild birds are being tested so that if H5N1 bird flu occurs in the United States we will recognize it right away. State and Federal agriculture and wildlife agencies have a list of birds that are of most concern and have begun testing these birds. Most birds do not need to be tested.

Q) What birds are being tested?

A) Waterfowl, such as swans, ducks and geese, are a top priority to be tested. The vast majority of backyard birds — robins, sparrows, pigeons, cardinals, etc. — do not need to be reported or tested. Avian influenza usually involves migratory waterfowl, not backyard birds. If you are concerned about dead waterfowl in your area, contact your regional Department of Environmental Conservation office.

Q) If most birds are not being tested for disease, why am I still being asked to report dead crows?

A) Dead crow reports help us to know whether West Nile virus is present in an area. Just knowing where crows are dying tells us a lot. Dead crow reports are still important to help us track West Nile virus, but most crows will not be picked up or tested.

Q) I found a dead bird in my yard—what should I do?

A) There is no need to report a dead bird unless it is a crow. Dead crow reports help us to track West Nile virus, so please call 1-866-537-BIRD if you see a dead crow. Other types of birds do not have to be reported unless there are many dead birds in the same area. Call your regional Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) office if you see a lot of dead birds in the same place. You may also visit the State DEC web site at: www.dec.state.ny.us for contact information for regional offices. DEC will decide if testing is needed. To dispose of a dead bird, use a shovel and wear gloves to double-bag the dead bird and throw it in the trash, or bury it at least three feet deep, away from a stream or other water source. Always wash hands after disposing of a dead bird in this way.

Q) Should we stop feeding birds and not have bird feeders?

A) There is no need to change your normal practices for feeding backyard birds at this time. If the H5N1 bird flu does occur in our country, experts may have different advice, depending on what has been learned about the role of wild birds in spreading bird flu to humans.

Q) Should I feed ducks, geese and other waterfowl?

A) Unlike backyard birds, waterfowl are more likely to be infected when bird flu is present. But there are many other reasons that you should not feed ducks and geese. It increases the chance of spreading many diseases that are common among waterfowl. It makes them tame, and causes them to become a nuisance. They lose their natural behaviors. It is best to enjoy your local wildlife from a distance!

Q) Should I stop hunting waterfowl?

A) No. However, waterfowl hunters should always take simple precautions to protect themselves from exposure to disease, including:

- Do not handle obviously sick birds or birds found dead.
- Keep your game birds cool, clean and dry.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke while cleaning harvested waterfowl.
- Wear rubber gloves when cleaning waterfowl.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after cleaning waterfowl.
- Clean up tools and surfaces immediately with hot, soapy water and disinfect with a mixture of 10 percent household chlorine bleach in water.
- Thoroughly cook harvested waterfowl (165° Fahrenheit).

Q) There are lots of pigeons around. Am I at risk for bird flu from them?

A) No, right now the H5N1 bird flu is not present in the United States. Even if bird flu arrives here, pigeons will likely not be the highest risk species. Waterfowl, such as swans, ducks and geese, are the type of birds that are most likely to become sick with bird flu when it is in an area. Although pigeons may be affected by bird flu less often than waterfowl, there is a small risk of people becoming infected by cleaning up bird droppings, so people should always use gloves and wash their hands when handling ill or dead birds or bird droppings. Because we are still learning about the bird flu virus, experts may have different advice if it arrives here, depending on what has been learned about the role of wild birds in spreading bird flu to humans.

Q) Can I get bird flu from my neighbor's birds and animals?

A) No, you don't have to be concerned that neighbor's birds and animals will expose you to bird flu at this time. If H5N1 bird flu does occur in our country, additional guidance from experts will be developed. Bird flu is primarily a disease among birds and rarely spreads to other animals and humans. Most people who got sick with bird flu had come into contact with infected chickens or domestic ducks and touched them with their bare hands.

Q) With the concern over bird flu, is it safe for my child to take part in projects that involve hatching eggs and raising chicks?

A) Yes. Chickens that get infected with bird flu become ill and often stop laying eggs so there is little risk of bird flu. However, chicks can carry other diseases such as salmonella. Projects involving hatching eggs and raising chicks should minimize hand contact and require thorough hand washing if contact does occur.

Q) With the concern over bird flu, is it safe to eat poultry and eggs?

A) Yes. There is no evidence that properly cooked poultry or eggs can be a source of infection from bird flu. Because other common diseases such as salmonella infection can be spread by eating undercooked poultry or eggs, always cook them thoroughly. Wash your hands with soap and hot water after touching any raw meat. Make sure to clean cutting boards and counters used for food preparation immediately after use to prevent cross contamination with other foods.

Q) Can I get bird flu from Canada goose droppings in parks, ballparks, reservoirs and other public places?

A) No. Right now, the H5N1 bird flu is not present in the United States. If and when it does occur in our country, we hope to have learned more about the role of wild birds in spreading bird flu to humans. Because many different bacteria, viruses and parasites can be present in bird droppings, it is best to avoid exposure to them at all times. The following precautions should be taken:

- Teach children to always wash their hands after playing outside.
- If you pick up droppings, use a shovel, “pooper scooper,” or gloves—never your bare hands.
- If you are worried about exposure during swimming, swim at a regulated beach, where regular tests are conducted to make sure the water is not polluted from human, animal or farm waste.