

Avian Influenza

What is avian flu?

Avian influenza, or “bird flu,” is a contagious avian flu virus (H5N1) that infects birds, mainly poultry (chicken, turkey). Humans and some animals can also contract the H5N1 virus if they come in to contact with infected birds or contaminated environments.

Do migratory birds spread the avian flu virus?

Yes. Some bird species can carry the H5N1 virus without showing symptoms of illness and are able to infect other birds. Spread of H5N1 avian flu virus to new geographic areas of the world is expected with the natural migration of birds.

Why am I hearing about avian flu on the news?

Many scientists and public health officials are concerned about the H5N1 virus and its affect on birds and humans. The current outbreaks of H5N1 avian flu virus in bird populations are the largest and most severe on record. Millions of birds have become infected and died from this avian H5N1 virus, and H5N1 has spread to many different countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa. A few hundred people have contracted the H5N1 virus after having close contact with infected birds; about half of whom have since died.

Scientists and public health officials are concerned that if the H5N1 virus changes, or “mutates,” within a human it could become a new human flu virus that could easily be spread from person-to-person. If this change in the virus occurs, most humans would have no or little natural resistance to the disease and it could begin a new pandemic, or “global,” flu outbreak within the human population.

How do people become infected?

Direct contact with infected birds, or surfaces and objects contaminated by their feces, is considered the main route of human infection. To date, most human cases have occurred in areas where people have had very close contact with infected birds. As infected birds shed large quantities of virus in their feces, opportunities for exposure to infected droppings or to environments contaminated by the virus are very high. Exposure to the H5N1 virus is also likely during the slaughter, defeathering, butchering, and preparation of poultry for cooking.

Is it safe to eat poultry and poultry products?

Yes. Poultry and poultry products can be safely consumed provided these items are properly handled, prepared, and cooked ([following good hygienic practices and proper cooking](#)), with no fear of acquiring infection with the H5N1 virus.

The H5N1 virus is sensitive to heat. Normal temperatures used for cooking (170 degrees Fahrenheit in all parts of the food) will kill the virus. People need to be sure that all parts of the poultry are fully cooked (no "pink" parts) and that eggs are properly cooked (no "runny" yolks).

People should also be aware of the risk of cross-contamination. During food preparation, the juices from raw poultry and poultry products should never be allowed to touch or mix with any food items that will be eaten raw. When handling raw poultry or raw poultry products, people involved in food preparation should wash their hands thoroughly and clean and disinfect surfaces in contact with the poultry products. Soap and hot water will work. In areas experiencing outbreaks of H5N1 in poultry, raw eggs should not be used in foods that will not be thoroughly cooked. The H5N1 avian flu virus cannot be transmitted through properly cooked food.

Can I get avian flu in Washington State?

At this time, the risk is low of getting the H5N1 virus in Washington or the United States. No cases of the H5N1 virus have been detected in birds or humans in the United States. The federal government is currently tracking migrating birds and testing birds to determine if they are carrying the H5N1 virus. Also, poultry products sold to eat in the U.S. are strictly regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and surveillance is underway testing the poultry products that are sold in the U.S for the H5N1 avian flu virus.

I raise poultry. How can I protect my birds from disease?

Birds can become sick or die from exposure to a number of bacteria, viruses, or parasites, not just the H5N1 virus. The following tips from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Veterinary Services office will help decrease the risk of disease entering your flock:

- Keep your distance: consider fencing off the area where your birds are to form a barrier between "clean" and "dirty" areas. Restrict access to caretakers only.
- Keep it clean: keep a pair of shoes and clothes to wear only around your birds. Clean and disinfect your shoes and clothing to remove droppings or debris. Clean and disinfect cages and equipment that comes into contact with your birds or their droppings.
- Don't haul disease home: if you travel to a location where other birds are present, be sure to clean and disinfect car and truck tires, poultry cages, and other equipment before your return to you property.
- Don't borrow disease from your neighbor: do not share poultry equipment or tools with other bird owners. Never share wooden pallets or cardboard egg cartons because they cannot be adequately cleaned or disinfected.
- Know that warning signs of infectious bird diseases: early detection is important to prevent the spread of disease. Look for sudden increases in birth deaths in your flock; respiratory problems, diarrhea, lack of energy, and poor appetite among your birds; drop in egg production, unusual swelling or discoloration of wattles, combs and legs; tremors or other unusual movements.
- Report sick birds: call the USDA toll-free hotline (1-866-536-7593) for more information.

What can I do to protect myself against avian flu?

Practicing good health habits and maintaining a healthy immune system is the best defense against any type of flu. A regular flu shot will help protect you from the common, seasonal flu as well. You can reduce the spread of the flu by:

- Covering your mouth while you sneeze or cough
- Washing your hands with soap and water frequently to reduce the chance of infection
- Using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer and wipes to frequently disinfect your hands and common surfaces that you and others come in contact with
- Staying home if you are sick so other people are not exposed

For additional information on Avian Flu, please visit www.avianflu.gov or www.usda.gov