

Bird Flu and Your Birds

What is bird flu?

Bird flu is a viral infection that occurs naturally in birds. There are many types of bird flu, and most are mild and do not cause severe illness in birds. One type of bird flu that has received a lot of attention in the media, called **Asian H5N1**, has led to the death of millions of poultry and many wild birds, and can sometimes be passed from birds to people or to cats. This virus is not easily spread from person to person, and is currently not found in North America, including the United States. However, Asian H5N1 has spread in birds across Asia and into Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The majority of infected people were exposed to the virus by their own infected poultry, and about half of the people died. Most people do not need to worry about this virus. But, once the virus is found in the United States, it can be a serious problem for poultry, wild birds, and bird owners here.



If this is a mostly a bird disease, why is it in the news so much?

It is possible that this virus will eventually be found in wildlife in North America. But even if it isn't, scientists are afraid that this virus may mutate and become very contagious between people. If this happens, it would be called *pandemic flu*. This has not happened yet, and no one can say for sure if it will happen. But this virus is already a big health concern for birds and, sometimes, for bird owners. (For more information about pandemic flu, visit pandemicflu.gov).

What are the symptoms of this virus in infected birds?

The virus is especially lethal in chickens. It can kill them rapidly, in 1-2 days. Infected chickens may have diarrhea, cough, sneezing, problems with breathing or walking, purple discoloration and swelling of the legs and face, or sudden death. Ducks can be infected without acting sick. Other domestic and wild birds can become infected and die from the virus, but it is not clear what symptoms to expect in all birds.

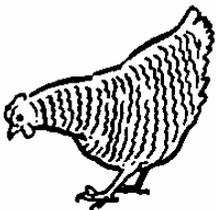
How is this virus being spread?

The virus is very contagious between birds. It is found in the feces, saliva, feathers, muscles, and eggs of an infected bird. Some birds, especially ducks, can catch the virus and spread it without getting sick. Infected migrating birds, smuggling of infected poultry and exotic birds, and equipment that is contaminated with bird feces may be helping spread the virus from country to country, and house to house.

Could pet birds give the virus to their owners?

There are no reports of anyone in the world catching the virus from a pet bird, but it may be possible. It would require close contact with the infected bird or its feces. When there is any contact between blood, feces, saliva or tissues of the infected bird and the eyes, mouth, or nose of a person, there is some risk of transmitting the virus. In other countries, a few people caught the virus from slaughtering and plucking feathers from infected birds. If a person touches a sick bird or its feces and then unconsciously touch their own face they may be exposed. However, since Asian H5N1 is not presently found in pets, poultry, or wildlife in the United States, you should not be afraid of catching bird flu from animals here. Nonetheless, you should still follow proper preventative steps (washing you hands,

keeping you bird equipment clean) to avoid other illnesses that you can catch from your birds.



I have pet birds. How can I protect my birds and my family from this virus Asian H5N1?

The first step is to protect the health of your birds. Right now there is no vaccine against the virus available for use in birds in the United States, so you must protect your birds in other ways.

1. Keep all types of wild birds away from your birds and their food and water. You may keep your birds indoors. You can also keep them outdoors in an enclosure with a solid roof and with sides with a fine mesh that can keep out all wild birds and their feces. Do not let your birds loose.

2. Keep new birds away from your birds. Do not let other people bring pet birds into your home. If you get a new bird, keep it away from your other birds for a month to make sure it is not carrying a disease. A bird can be infected and not act sick right away. Your hands, shoes, and clothes can carry germs that make your birds sick. Wash your hands and clean your shoes and clothes after you go to a bird event or after you visit your friends' birds.

3. Use good sanitation. Keep your birds and their cages away from food preparation and dining areas. Keep the aviary or cage clean. Clean the food and water containers at least once a week. Clean stuck-on material with warm soap and water, then apply a disinfectant and let it sit for 10-20 minutes before rinsing it off and drying. Do not use disinfectants near your pet birds – it may be toxic to them. Wear gloves when you clean and wash your hands afterward. Make sure there is plenty of fresh air around you when cleaning. Do not breathe in dust – it can carry dangerous germs into your lungs. Do not sweep dried bird feces-it is safer to spray them with disinfectant, then wipe them up. Wash your hands every time after handling your birds. Change your clothes after handling birds or after cleaning the aviary or cage. Most commonly used disinfectants kill the virus, but they will not work if feces remain stuck to surfaces.

4. Thoroughly cook meat and eggs. Cooking kills bird flu and other dangerous germs. Everyone should already be cooking meat and eggs completely, because germs such as Salmonella can occasionally be found in them. Eggs at the grocery store are already washed clean. Before you eat the eggs from any home-grown chickens, clean the outside of the eggs with warm, soapy water. Cook meat and eggs completely, with no runny yolks. Do not use recipes calling for raw eggs. Any plate or utensil that touches raw meat may have germs on it – do not use them for the cooked meat.

5. Report illnesses in your birds. If your birds are acting sick, report this to your avian veterinarian, and to Veterinary Public Health (telephone 877-747-2243).

What more should I do?

Follow the news. If you hear about a case of bird flu, ask if it is the Asian H5N1 strain (most strains of avian influenza do NOT infect people). Ask if it has mutated to become contagious between people and become pandemic flu (this has not happened). If you know about a group of birds dying anywhere in Los Angeles County, please report it to **Veterinary Public Health (telephone 877-747-2243, fax 562-401-7112, or at our website <http://lapublichealth.org/vet/disintro.htm>)**.

Here are two excellent websites to learn more about protecting your birds and yourself..

UDSA-APHIS Program “Biosecurity for the Birds”

<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity/>

USGS National Wildlife Health Center – Safety Guidelines for Handling Wild Birds.

http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/publications/wildlife_health_bulletins/WHB_05_03.jsp