

Avian Influenza H5N1

Avian influenza, commonly known as the "bird flu," is a highly contagious viral infection that primarily affects wild and domestic birds but can also impact mammals, including humans. The current strain, H5N1, was first identified in the United States in poultry in February 2022. It has since affected a variety of wildlife species in Michigan, including red foxes, opossums, raccoons, and coyotes, as well as domestic animals like dairy cattle and cats. While human cases have been reported, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers the risk to the general public low, especially for those without direct exposure to infected animals.

Human Cases and Transmission

In the United States, 66 human cases of H5N1 have been confirmed, with two in Michigan linked to infected dairy cattle. Nationwide, infections have been associated with exposure to infected commercial poultry and dairy operations, wild birds, and backyard flocks. Fortunately, there has been no evidence of person-to-person transmission of H5N1.

Risks to Cats and Other Animals

Cats can become infected with H5N1 through consumption of infected prey, raw or undercooked poultry, or via contaminated environments. Raw milk from infected dairy herds is presumed to be a source of infection for wildlife and domestic cats. Large-scale outbreaks in feral cat colonies have not been documented. According to the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) "Cats are not significant epidemiological vectors of avian influenza to humans or other animals."

Recognizing Symptoms in Cats

- **Respiratory signs:** Difficulty breathing, coughing, sneezing
- **Neurological signs:** Tremors, uncoordinated movements, seizures
- **General signs:** Lethargy or sudden death

What Can We Be Doing for Our Cats?

1. Limit Cat Exposure to Wild Birds

- Reduce access to areas frequented by birds. Remove bird feeders and baths.
- Properly dispose of bird carcasses.
- Relocate colonies away from high-risk areas, if possible.

2. Consider Colony Surveillance

- Encourage caregivers to watch for behavioral or health changes.
- Use trail cameras to monitor unusual activity or mortality events.

3. Use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Always wear gloves, masks, and other PPE when handling sick or deceased cats.

4. Remove Sick Cats Promptly

- Isolate visibly sick cats and have them evaluated by a veterinarian.

What Can We Be Doing for Our Cats? (Cont'd)

5. Promote Safe Feeding Practices

- Avoid providing raw or undercooked poultry.
- Do not feed unpasteurized dairy products.
- Recommend commercially prepared cat food or thoroughly cooked scraps.

While the risk of widespread H5N1 outbreaks in feral colonies is low, localized infections are possible. Proactive measures such as monitoring, using PPE, relocating colonies from high-risk areas, and promptly isolating sick animals can significantly reduce risks. By staying vigilant, we can protect feral cats and minimize potential zoonotic threats, safeguarding both animal and public health.

As a general precaution, whenever possible, people should avoid contact with sick or dead animals, in particular wild birds, and poultry.

- For individuals with direct/close contact with wild birds or sick or dead poultry or other animals, wear recommended PPE when direct contact cannot be avoided. Wild birds can be infected with avian influenza even if they don't look sick.
- Do not touch surfaces or materials (e.g. litter or bedding material) contaminated with saliva, mucous, or animal feces from wild or domestic birds or other animals with confirmed or suspected avian influenza infection.
- Wash hands thoroughly after touching or interacting with animals outside your household.

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