

# Avian Influenza

## Q. WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA (BIRD FLU)?

A. Avian influenza is a common disease of birds that rarely infects humans. These viruses are classified as having low pathogenicity or high pathogenicity based on the severity of the illness they cause in poultry and most are not considered a public health threat.

Fact:The highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza has not been detected in North America.

Fact:Highly pathogenic strains, like highly pathogenic H5N1, cause severe illness and rapid death in poultry. H5N1 has caused the largest and most severe outbreaks in poultry on record.

Fact:At present, the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of the bird flu virus does not easily infect people and rarely spreads from person to person.

Fact:In cases where the H5N1 strain has infected humans, it is a serious disease; while only about 200 people are known to have contracted the disease, about half of them have died.

## Q. WHAT IS A BIRD FLU PANDEMIC?

A. Influenza pandemics are caused by the global spread of a new influenza virus that has adapted to humans and is easily transmitted from person to person.

Fact:There currently is no human influenza pandemic occurring anywhere in the world.

Fact:If the current H5N1 is detected in North America, it will not signal the start of a flu pandemic.

Fact:At this time, the H5N1 virus is not capable of causing a flu pandemic.

Fact:Scientists are concerned that H5N1, or another strain of influenza, could mutate to become a human flu virus that is easily transmitted from person to person and which could trigger an influenza pandemic.

## Q. HOW IS AVIAN INFLUENZA SPREAD?

A. Legal and illegal movement of infected birds; poultry products; contaminated materials, equipment and vehicles; as well as wild bird migration are ways that H5N1 is spread.

Fact:The highly pathogenic H5N1 strain has spread to large geographic areas in Asia, Europe and Africa, where it has primarily affected domestic poultry.

Fact:Most human cases of avian influenza have occurred in people who have had close contact with infected poultry or have eaten infected poultry that was improperly cooked.

## Q. WHO IS RESPONDING? WHAT'S BEING DONE?

A. The U.S. National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza is guiding the U.S. preparedness and response to an influenza pandemic, with the three goals: Preparedness and Communication; Surveillance and Detection; and Response and Containment.

Federal and state domestic animal, wildlife and public health agencies are working closely to prepare, prevent and respond to the potential introduction of the highly pathogenic H5N1 virus into the United States.

The U.S. Departments of Interior, Agriculture and Health & Human Services are working with other federal and state agencies in implementing a National Early Detection System for Highly Pathogenic H5N1 Avian Influenza in Wild Migratory Birds focused on:

- Rapid investigation of wild bird mortality in the U.S;
- Surveillance in live wild birds;
- Surveillance in hunter-killed wild birds ;
- The use of sentinel species to detect H5N1 and
- Environmental sampling of areas frequented by wild birds.

PGC biologists are sampling live Canada geese and mallards statewide, as well as scaup (a species of diving duck), taken by hunters on Lake Erie to test for avian influenza. Water samples from areas where waterfowl congregate are also being taken and tested for avian influenza. The PGC is occasionally finding various forms of the low pathogenicity Avian Influenza virus in these samples. This is expected because these viruses regularly coexist with these birds. The presence of the low pathogenic virus poses no threat to human health.

Fact:H5N1 has been eliminated from countries such as Japan, South Korea and Israel by quick and efficient eradication of the disease in domestic poultry.

## Q. WHAT IS THE ROLE OF WILD BIRDS IN THE SPREAD OF AVIAN INFLUENZA?

A. Migratory birds - typically waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls and terns - are natural carriers of avian influenza and are considered the natural reservoir for low-pathogenic strains of the disease. The impact of highly pathogenic H5N1 on migratory birds and the role that wild birds play in the spread of H5N1 is unclear. In many cases, scientists are uncertain if wild birds were the source of the H5N1 virus or if they acquired it from poultry. Once infected, wild birds could transport the virus to a new location, but infected birds are rarely able to travel far.

Fact:If the highly pathogenic H5N1 is detected in wild birds in the United States it does not necessarily pose a threat to the general public or to the U.S. poultry industry.

Fact:The highly pathogenic H5N1 has been detected in an increasing number of wild bird species; however, the actual number of wild birds infected with H5N1 has been relatively low.

Fact:There currently is no scientific basis for controlling highly pathogenic H5N1 by management of wild birds beyond physically segregating poultry from exposure to wild birds.

## Q. SHOULD WATERFOWL HUNTERS TAKE SPECIAL PRECAUTIONS?

A. Hunters should follow routine precautions when handling game.

- Do not handle or eat sick game.
- Wear rubber or disposable latex gloves while handling and cleaning game, wash hands and thoroughly clean knives, equipment and surfaces that come in contact with game.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling animals.
- All game and poultry products should be thoroughly cooked (160 o F).

## Q. SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT MY BIRD FEEDER?

A. Exercise good hygiene when maintaining or filling your bird feeders. The PGC recommends cleaning your feeders periodically with a household soap, rinsing them thoroughly, then following up with a rinse of a solution of nine parts water to one part chlorine bleach and allowing to dry without rinsing.

## Q. WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I FIND A DEAD BIRD?

A. A certain level of mortality in wild birds is normal. Wild bird mortality occurs as a result of trauma, ingestion of pesticides, infections and accidents of nature, most of which pose no threat to the health of domestic animals or people.

Incidents of five or more ill or dead birds (not including pigeons) in the same geographic area over a one- or two-day period may indicate a die-off and should be reported to your PGC region office during regular business hours. Bag and refrigerate (do not freeze) the birds in a cooler with ice until arrangements for pickup or disposal can be made.

Even in cases involving five or more birds, the cause of death can often be determined without laboratory testing. PGC staff may make arrangements to acquire dead birds or recommend disposing of them in a plastic bag in household trash that ends up at a regulated landfill.

The PGC's wild bird mortality investigations are part of a larger operation in cooperation with USDA Wildlife Services. In addition to following up on citizen reports of dead birds, PGC biologists are sampling live Canada geese and mallards statewide, as well as scaup (a species of diving duck), taken by hunters on Lake Erie to test for avian influenza. Water samples also will be taken from areas where waterfowl congregate and tested for avian influenza.

Source: <http://www.pgc.pa.gov/Wildlife/Wildlife-RelatedDiseases/Pages/AvianInfluenza.aspx>