

Avian H5N1 in Minnesota Birds

Although no cases of animal or human illness have been identified in the U.S., the avian H5N1 influenza virus is spreading rapidly in birds and animals in other parts of the world. If it comes to Minnesota birds, how can you protect yourself from getting sick?

If an infected bird is found here, does it signal the start of a pandemic?

No. The H5N1 bird flu strain is still almost entirely a disease of birds. Right now, this is still a “bird pandemic” – not a human pandemic. In rare cases, the H5N1 virus has caused human illness – but only in people who have had extensive, close contact with infected domestic poultry or their droppings. No one has been infected through contact with wild birds or other people.

Unless the H5N1 bird flu virus changes dramatically – so it can be passed easily from person to person – we are unlikely to see widespread human disease.

Do we need to be concerned about a flu pandemic?

Public health officials remain concerned about the possibility of a future pandemic. We need to be prepared for that possibility. Three worldwide flu pandemics have occurred in the last century, and scientists believe that another pandemic will occur some day.

If the H5N1 bird flu strain changes, so it can be passed easily from person to person, it could still end up causing a pandemic. That may or may not happen. A pandemic could also be caused by a completely different flu virus – one that we haven’t seen yet.

Public health officials at all levels of government are watching closely for changes in

the H5N1 bird flu virus – and any other potential pandemic threats.

What’s being done to monitor for H5N1 bird flu in wild birds?

Surveillance for H5N1 bird flu is underway on major bird migration routes leading into the U.S. The U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are working with state officials – primarily in Alaska – to test thousands of wild birds.

- USGS National Wildlife Health Organization - Avian Influenza (http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/avian_influenza/index.jsp)

The National Wildlife Health Center has conducted several studies to test migratory birds for H5N1.

While Minnesota has not been directly involved in the federal testing, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources supports these efforts.

Anticipated surveillance efforts in Minnesota include investigation of waterfowl die-offs, sampling of birds in connection with bird-banding, and hunter bag-checks. The University of Minnesota and others will be doing some limited testing of birds. The DNR will also be assisting with those efforts.

There are many strains of bird flu besides the “H5N1” strain, and it’s not uncommon to find them in wild birds. None of them currently pose a threat to human health. Other bird flu strains are around all the time. We have experience looking for them and responding to them.



Minnesota Department of Health
625 N. Robert St.
P.O. Box 64975
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975
651-201-5414
www.health.state.mn.us

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What is being done to protect our commercial poultry flocks?

Commercial poultry is monitored carefully for illness – including different strains of bird flu – by state and federal authorities. In Minnesota, chickens and turkeys are monitored for disease by the state Department of Agriculture and the Board of Animal Health.

In the event that a strain of bird flu is found in a poultry flock, procedures are in place to isolate the sick birds, or take other steps to stop the spread of the virus.

Different strains of bird flu are around all the time. Some pose a serious threat to the health of poultry flocks, and others do not. We have experience looking for them and responding to them.

What should I do if I find a dead bird?

Wild birds can carry the H5N1 bird flu virus, but it usually doesn't make them sick. If you find a dead bird, it's unlikely that it died from H5N1 bird flu.

If you find a dead bird, you can either leave it be or simply put it in a plastic bag in the garbage – and then wash your hands thoroughly.

- Washing with Soap and Water (<http://www.health.state.mn.us/handhygiene/handwashing.html>)
Comprehensive guide to properly washing your hands with soap and water.

The Minnesota Department of Health will not be testing wild birds for H5N1 bird flu, or accepting dead birds for testing. You may remember that MDH did test dead birds for West Nile Virus; however, that was done to help document the different regions of Minnesota. Now that West Nile Virus is known to be present throughout the state, MDH has discontinued testing of birds for this virus.

H5N1 bird flu is most likely to cause large die-offs in waterfowl and some other water birds. Individual dead bird sightings, or dead birds of

other species, likely represent deaths from some other cause.

Can I get sick from wild birds or their droppings?

There have been no reported cases where people have gotten H5N1 bird flu from wild birds. In general, you should try to avoid contact with wild birds or their droppings – not necessarily because of bird flu, but as a general health precaution.

If you can't avoid contact with wild birds or their droppings, wash your hands, and avoid bringing feces into your home on shoes or clothing. Clean your shoes or clothing as necessary. A bleach solution and exposure to sunlight are helpful for disinfecting shoes.

Is it safe to eat wild game birds? What precautions should hunters take?

There have been no reported cases where people have gotten H5N1 bird flu from wild birds. Regardless of any potential threat from H5N1 bird flu, always follow these routine precautions when handling or cooking wild game:

Do not eat or handle any game birds that appear to be sick.

Wear rubber or disposable latex gloves when handling or cleaning game birds.

After handling game, thoroughly wash your hands, as well any knives, equipment, or surfaces that came in contact with game.

Do not eat, drink, smoke, or rub your eyes or mouth while handling game.

Thoroughly cook all game to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F or higher.

Is it safe to buy and eat chicken and other poultry?

Even if the H5N1 bird flu virus is present in poultry, it is extremely unlikely that you would ever be infected by handling, cooking, or consuming it.

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Commercial poultry are monitored carefully for illness – including different strains of bird flu – by state and federal authorities. In Minnesota, chickens and turkeys are monitored for disease by the state Department of Agriculture and the Board of Animal Health.

It should be safe to prepare and eat poultry if you following normal precautions for handling and cooking it:

Clean all utensils and food preparation services thoroughly after working with raw poultry.

Wash your hands well after handling raw poultry.

Cook poultry thoroughly – to an internal temperature of 165 degrees or higher – before eating it.

You should be following these precautions anyway, to prevent routine food-related diseases like salmonellosis.

Is it safe to eat eggs?

There are no known cases where people have gotten H5N1 bird flu from eating eggs. Cooking should kill any bacteria or viruses that may be present in eggs. Be sure to cook eggs thoroughly – so the yolks are not runny or liquid.

Is it safe to keep "back yard chickens" or other poultry near where I live?

If you own birds, a few simple precautions can help you reduce any potential risk to your birds or to your own health.

Monitor your birds daily for any signs of disease. In birds, flu causes swelling around the head and discharge from the eyes, nose and mouth. The H5N1 strain causes severe illness and death in chickens and turkeys.

Keep wild birds – especially waterfowl – away from your domestic birds. Avoid exposing your birds to feed, water, or bedding that may have been contaminated by wild birds.

Avoid exposing your birds to sick birds. If your birds become severely ill – or die – consult a veterinarian promptly.

Wash your hands thoroughly after working with your birds to minimize any potential exposure to bird flu.

If you have questions about safe handling of your birds, contact the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Biosecurity for the Birds program (<http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/birdbiosecurity>), or call 1-866-536-7593.

Do bird feeders pose any health risk for humans?

There have been no reported cases where people have gotten H5N1 bird flu from wild birds. Bird flu is primarily a disease of waterfowl and shorebirds and is not typically seen in the "back yard" bird species that visit bird feeders.

Because wild birds can also carry other diseases, such as salmonellosis, a number of precautions are recommended for people who keep bird feeders:

Wear rubber or disposal latex gloves while cleaning bird feeders or birdbaths.

Use a plastic bag to pick up any dead birds and dispose of them in the garbage.

Do not eat, drink, smoke, or rub your eyes or mouth after handling birds until you can thoroughly wash your hands

Should people be concerned about swimming in lakes where waterfowl are present?

The risk of being infected by swimming in the same water with infected waterfowl is extremely low. There is no evidence that anyone has ever been infected in this way.

As a general health precaution, bathers may want to avoid shallow areas where waterfowl may be present – and especially avoid swallowing any water.

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What about pets? Are they at risk?

And are they a potential threat?

There are no known cases where people have gotten H5N1 bird flu from animals other than chickens. A few cases of H5N1 bird flu have been reported in large cats or domestic cats, in Europe or Asia. In all cases, these animals got H5N1 bird flu by eating raw, infected poultry.

Regardless of any potential risk from H5N1 bird flu, pet cats should always be kept indoors in order to minimize other possible health risks.

Pet birds should not be at any risk as long as they have no contact with wild birds.