



Protecting birds from the threat of avian influenza



Avian influenza or bird flu, is a highly contagious viral disease of birds. It can affect most wild and domesticated bird species. Wild birds and waterfowl can carry low pathogenicity strains of the virus and usually don't show signs of the disease, but they can infect other birds and poultry.

Avian influenza is designated highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) when it has characteristics that cause mass disease and mortality in infected poultry. H5N1 is the strain of HPAI which is currently causing the outbreaks of disease in the northern hemisphere.

Since February 2021, Australia has been officially free of HPAI following an outbreak of the disease in Victoria in mid-2020. It was the largest recorded outbreak of HPAI in Australia.

The risk of HPAI entering Australia is considered low, however ongoing outbreaks globally have increased our level of risk. With the return of migratory birds from the northern hemisphere to Australia from September to November, there is likely a higher chance for an introduction of HPAI viruses into Australia compared to previous years.

The signs of HPAI in birds can be common to many other avian diseases, but it's important that if you notice anything unusual, report it to your local veterinarian or to the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888. Common signs of HPAI in birds can include:

- sudden death
- respiratory distress
- lethargy
- inability to walk
- no appetite
- unusual head or neck posture
- droopy appearance
- diarrhoea
- ruffled feathers
- swollen head, wattle or comb
- drop in egg production.

H5N1 spreads quickly if domestic birds mix with wild birds and animals. The disease can also spread through close contact, in the air, or by people. It can spread through:

- movement of live birds
- contact between animals including bites and scratches
- droppings, mucus and skin
- clothing and footwear
- animal bedding, feed and water containers
- cages, vehicles and equipment.

Meat and eggs can become contaminated and spread disease. H5N1 can also remain active in manure, water and carcasses for days or weeks.

All bird owners have a vital role to play in stopping disease outbreaks and good biosecurity practices are the best prevention against H5N1.

Important biosecurity measures:

- Keep equipment and poultry yard or aviary clean.
- Keep food and water sources clear of faeces or other animal waste.
- Quarantine new birds arriving into the flock for 30 days.
- Limit visitors to your birds.
- Prevent contact between your birds and wild birds.

H5N1 does not easily cause disease in people and there is low risk of getting H5N1 through normal contact with birds. Human infection usually requires very close contact with sick or dead birds. Australia is well prepared to respond to an avian influenza outbreak and we have well developed and tested plans in place to respond to animal disease emergencies.

If you notice any unexplained symptoms in your birds including sudden deaths, you must report it immediately to your local veterinarian, or the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888.

For further information about bird biosecurity, please visit:

<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/pests-diseases-weeds/protect-animal-plant/bird-owners>

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