

USDA Key Messages for Avian Influenza

Scenario 1: HPAI Avian Influenza Detection in U.S.

Educating the media and the public about the complexities of avian influenza as a disease among birds is one of USDA's primary communications objectives.

As part of this effort, USDA, in partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services, Department of the Interior, and Department of Homeland Security, have developed three scenarios in the event of a detection and/or outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza in the United States.

The scenarios are:

- 1) a highly pathogenic avian influenza detection in the United States;
- 2) a highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza detection in wild birds; and
- 3) a highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza detection in commercial poultry

Each of these scenarios contains a series of key questions and answers about animal health, guidance for the public, as well as a summary of the actions USDA would take in the event of a highly pathogenic avian influenza detection in the United States.

Scenario 1: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Detection in U.S. – Key

- 1-1. What is bird flu?
- 1-2. How can people become infected with avian influenza?
- 1-3. What if a suspected HPAI outbreak in the U.S. is confirmed?
- 1-4. If an HPAI outbreak in the U.S. occurs, will consumer confidence in the safety of poultry be affected?
- 1-5. Would an HPAI detection signal the start of a human flu pandemic?
- 1-6. If an outbreak occurs, what will USDA do to eliminate HPAI from the United States?
- 1-7. What happens if there is more than one HPAI outbreak in birds?
- 1-8. If there is an HPAI outbreak, who is in charge?
- 1-9. If there were an HPAI detection in the U.S., would it be safe to eat chicken and turkey bought at stores?
- 1-10. In the event of an HPAI detection, would it be safe to prepare and eat birds bought at live bird markets or raised at home?
- 1-11. If there are sick or dead birds, how can people protect themselves?
- 1-12. If there were an HPAI detection, what advice would you have for people who have pet birds?
- 1-13. Are other animals susceptible to AI viruses?
- 1-14. What food should I avoid?

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1-1 What is bird flu?

Avian influenza (AI)--the bird flu--is a virus that infects wild birds (such as ducks, gulls, and shorebirds) and domestic poultry (such as chickens, turkeys, ducks, and geese). There is a flu for birds just as there is for humans and, as with people, some forms of the flu are worse than others.

AI viruses are classified by a combination of two groups of proteins: the hemagglutinin or H proteins, of which there are 16 (H1-H16), and neuraminidase or N proteins, of which there are 9 (N1-N9). AI strains also are divided into two groups based upon the ability of the virus to produce disease in poultry: low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) and highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI).

LPAI, or “low path” avian influenza, naturally occurs in wild birds and can spread to domestic birds. In most cases it causes no signs of infection or only minor symptoms in birds. These strains of the virus pose little threat to human health. LPAI H5 and H7 strains have the potential to mutate into HPAI and are therefore closely monitored.

HPAI, or “high path” avian influenza, is often fatal in chickens and turkeys. HPAI spreads more rapidly than LPAI and has a higher death rate in birds. HPAI H5N1 is the type rapidly spreading in some parts of the world.

1-2 How can people become infected with avian influenza?

Avian Influenza is primarily a disease among birds, not people. Although the HPAI H5N1 virus does not usually infect people, more than 200 human cases have been reported since 2004. Most people who have become sick or died from HPAI H5N1 have had extensive, direct contact with infected poultry. Broad concerns about public health relate to the potential for the virus to mutate, or change into a form that could easily spread from person to person, a characteristic that could result in a human influenza pandemic. There is no evidence that this is occurring. Strains of AI that have been detected in U.S. poultry, including LPAI and HPAI, have caused no known human illnesses.

1-3 What if a suspected HPAI outbreak in the U.S. is confirmed?

This is still a disease among birds, not people. HPAI has been detected in the U.S. three times and successfully eradicated. If there is a new outbreak, USDA would act quickly and decisively to eradicate it. We would work closely with federal, state, and industry partners to monitor other bird species such as migratory waterfowl. We will be very transparent about any new developments or additional detections.

1-4 If an HPAI outbreak in the U.S. occurs, will consumer confidence in the safety of poultry be affected?

Consumers have the power to ensure the poultry and eggs that they eat are safe. Although it is highly unlikely that infected poultry would enter the U.S. food supply, proper handling and cooking poultry to an internal temperature of at least 165 °F kills the AI virus, just as it does other food borne illness-causing germs.

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1-5 Would an HPAI detection signal the start of a human flu pandemic?

No. Human illness from HPAI H5N1 overseas has resulted predominantly from direct contact with sick or dead birds. There is no evidence that this virus is spread easily from person-to-person. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is watching closely for any sign the virus has changed into a form that can more easily infect people. We will be very transparent about any new developments.

1-6 If an outbreak occurs, what will USDA do to eliminate HPAI from the United States?

In the event of a commercial outbreak, USDA will activate its response plan that includes five key steps: quarantine, eradicate, monitor, disinfect, and test. Specifically, USDA will:

- 1) Secure the affected poultry farm(s) and restrict movement of poultry and poultry equipment into and out of the control area;
- 2) Humanely euthanize all of the birds in any infected flock;
- 3) Maintain the control area until tests confirm the farm is AI-free;
- 4) Clean and disinfect the poultry houses and area after the birds have been depopulated; and
- 5) Test neighboring flocks and others in the area to quickly detect any spread.

In the event of a wild bird outbreak: USDA will conduct extensive testing in the flyway of other wild birds, commercial poultry operations, and backyard flocks. Specifically, USDA will:

- 1) Coordinate enhanced wild bird surveillance in the surrounding area where the event occurred;
- 2) Monitor potential wild bird threats to domestic poultry and assess the risk wild birds pose to the transmission of a HPAI virus to susceptible livestock and poultry; and
- 3) Implement enhanced surveillance plan for domestic poultry.

1-7 What happens if there is more than one HPAI outbreak in birds?

USDA is ready to act. USDA has a network of animal health experts and laboratories capable of assisting with testing and response to bird outbreaks. We have 600 veterinarians and 1,300 experts nationwide who are capable of assisting as well as a network of 39 states and academic laboratories nationwide that are approved to assist with testing bird samples.

1-8 If there is an HPAI outbreak, who is in charge?

USDA leads federal animal disease response and works in partnership with state and local animal health experts on response efforts. The U.S. poultry industry monitors and tests commercial flocks.

Federal agencies involved in the coordinated avian flu efforts include HHS, USDA, Department of the Interior, the Department of Homeland Security, and others.

While a detection of HPAI in birds would NOT signal the start of a human flu pandemic, HHS leads the federal response and preparation activities that related to public health. HHS works closely with state and local public health experts. Every citizen has a role in preparing for the possibility for any human pandemic. More information is available at www.pandemicflu.gov.

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1-9 If there were an HPAI detection in the U.S., would it be safe to eat chicken and turkey bought at stores?

Yes. All store-bought poultry has met USDA safety standards because it is processed under federal or state inspection. The majority of U.S. poultry is raised in very secure poultry houses, which significantly decreases the possibility of contact with other birds, animals, or people. To further ensure the safety of the U.S. food supply, USDA also prohibits the importation of poultry and poultry products from countries and/or regions where HPAI H5N1 has been detected in commercial or traditionally raised flocks (not wild birds).

People have the power to protect themselves - properly prepared and cooked poultry is safe to eat. Just remember to always follow these basic common-sense practices in order to protect yourself from any foodborne pathogens:

- 1) Wash hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food;
- 2) Prevent cross contamination by keeping raw poultry meat and its juices away from other foods; and
- 3) Cook all poultry to an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit. This kills foodborne germs that might be present, such as the AI virus.

1-10 In the event of an HPAI detection, would it be safe to prepare and eat birds bought at live bird markets or raised at home?

Yes, chicken, turkey, and wild birds are safe to eat when properly prepared and cooked. To protect yourself from any foodborne causing germs, USDA recommends that you: wash hands and utensils before and after handling food; keep raw poultry meat and juices away from other food, and cook all poultry to an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit. This kills the bird flu virus and other germs such as, Salmonella and E. Coli.

Should you buy meat from a live bird market, it would be highly unlikely that infected poultry would be sold because of the rapid onset of symptoms in birds as well as the numerous safeguards in place, which include testing of flocks and Federal inspection programs.

If you raise poultry in your back yard, it is very important that you call your local or state authorities or USDA toll-free – 1-866-536-7593 if your farm birds are sick. When disposing of a dead bird, be sure to wear gloves, use a plastic bag, and wash your hands afterwards.

1-11 If there are sick or dead birds, how can people protect themselves?

Report sick or dead birds to local or state authorities or the USDA wildlife services office in your state. Do not touch sick or dead wild birds with your bare hands. If you come in contact with wild birds or droppings you should immediately wash your hands. Hunters and backyard farmers should wear gloves when handling killed birds. It is good practice to always disinfect gloves, tools, and materials that come into contact with killed birds. More information about reporting sick or dead birds, and disinfecting your gear is available at www.usda.gov/birdflu. Tips for states, communities, and individual families are available at www.avianflu.gov.

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1-12 If there were an HPAI detection, what advice would you have for people who have pet birds?

Learn the warning signs of avian influenza in birds -- breathing problems, watery diarrhea, swelling around the head, neck, and eyes. Do not handle a bird that is showing any of these signs and call your veterinarian.

Buy birds from reputable sources and ensure that you have documentation of your new bird's origin. Smuggled birds could be a source of avian influenza, as well as other serious avian diseases. Be sure that you get your new birds checked by a veterinarian.

Keep your birds and areas around them clean and keep your birds away from other birds. If you have been around other birds, make sure that you clean your shoes, clothing, and other items. And don't forget to wash your hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling your birds.

1-13 Are other animals susceptible to AI viruses?

Wild and domestic birds are the most susceptible to AI. But swine are susceptible to some AI viruses (usually H1 and H3). However, there is no evidence of HPAI H5N1 being transmitted from pig to pig or pig to human.

Cats, rabbits, ferrets, rodents, and some primates are susceptible to some AI viruses. Exposure can come from preying upon infected or sick birds and droppings. Exposure is more likely in outdoor animals of these species. It is important to remember that these infections are very rare.

1-14 What food should I avoid?

There is no reason to avoid any food. All poultry is processed under federal or state inspection. We do not import poultry or products from countries and/or regions where HPAI was found in commercial or traditionally raised flocks (not wild birds). Food regulations and standards ensure that commercial poultry and egg products are safe.

Consumers have the power to ensure the poultry that they eat is safe. Thorough cooking of poultry to at least 165 degrees Fahrenheit kills germs including the AI virus. As always, proper handling of poultry and eggs is important and the key to food safety. Wash hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds before and after handling poultry and eggs. Do not eat raw or undercooked poultry and eggs. If you have any questions, call the USDA meat and poultry hotline at 1-888-MPHOTLINE.