

What Consumers Need to Know about Bird Flu (Influenza H5N1)¹

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The Impact of Bird Flu on Humans

Bird flu is caused by the H5N1 subtype of influenza A virus. This publication aims to help consumers better understand bird flu and ways bird flu may impact consumable products, such as eggs or milk. Among migratory birds and poultry, this virus can be highly contagious and cause severe disease and death. Variants of this virus can cause infections in dairy cows and other animals and can cause severe disease in cats. Rarely, it can infect humans.

Bird flu cases in humans are usually transmitted through direct exposure to infected animals or environments contaminated with the virus. Although human infections are rare, and most in the United States to date have been mild, they can be severe. The current risk to the general public is low.

Safety of Poultry Products

Poultry and poultry products, such as eggs, are safe to eat during a bird flu outbreak if normal food safety practices are followed. Eggs (both backyard and store-bought) are safe if properly cooked until yolks and whites are firm, if food containing eggs is cooked to an internal temperature of 160°F, or if pasteurized egg products are used. Poultry and poultry products are safe to consume if cooked thoroughly to an internal temperature of at least 165°F (74°C).

When handling raw poultry products, you should always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water, disinfect surfaces and utensils, and avoid cross-contamination by keeping raw poultry separate from other foods. It is not recommended to wash raw poultry or commercially bought eggs. Doing so may increase the risk of contamination. Raw poultry-based foods are not recommended for pets.

Milk during a Bird Flu Outbreak

Milk and dairy products sold for human consumption in the grocery store have been tested and pasteurized and are safe to eat and drink. Pasteurization is effective at killing bird flu and many other pathogens.

The USDA has recently implemented a bulk milk testing program for states where influenza H5N1 outbreaks have occurred. Other states also have begun similar voluntary testing programs. More information is available at <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-livestock>.

Raw milk is not safe to drink or to feed to pets. Raw milk that contains H5N1 can cause infection, including severe infections that can be fatal to cats. Raw milk can also have dangerous bacteria like *Salmonella* or *E. coli*. Pasteurized milk is recommended to ensure safety.

Bird Flu Impact on Other Animals

Cats, dogs, and other mammals can be infected through direct contact with the flu virus. Symptoms range from mild respiratory signs to severe and potentially fatal neurological illness.

Wild migratory birds can also carry and spread bird flu viruses, including influenza H5N1, to domestic poultry and livestock.

Do not touch or handle dead birds directly. Contact local wildlife officials to report sick or dead wild birds and agricultural authorities to report sick or dead domestic birds.

Contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to report dead wild birds: <https://myfwc.com/research/wildlife/health/avian/influenza/>.

Summary

Currently, vaccines for bird flu are being developed for poultry, dairy cows, and humans but are not yet available for use. Regularly check trusted sources such as UF/IFAS, your local UF/IFAS Extension office, or local health departments for updates and recommendations. This publication provides consumers with important information about bird flu and the safety of poultry products during a bird flu outbreak.

Frequently asked questions, fact sheets, and other helpful resources related to bird flu are also available through the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources:
<https://piecenter.com/resources/birdflu/>.

References

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