

What everyone should know about avian influenza

AVIAN INFLUENZA (“BIRD FLU”) IS A VIRAL ILLNESS FOUND in birds. Wild birds can carry a number of bird flu viruses, but most strains do not seriously affect them.

Bird flu viruses are unlikely to infect people who practice good hygiene when handling birds.

Occasionally bird flu viruses evolve into forms that are deadly to domestic chickens and turkeys. These viruses are known as “highly pathogenic avian influenza” (HPAI) viruses, a designation that refers to their ability to cause disease in domestic poultry, not in humans or any other animals.

In 1996, a particularly virulent form of bird flu caused by a strain of virus known as HPAI H5N1 sickened and killed birds in Asia, Africa and Europe. After close contact with infected domestic birds, more than 100 people in Asia died from HPAI H5N1 virus. HPAI H5N1 has not been detected in North America.

Since then, several different bird flu strains have been identified around the world in domestic birds, including HPAI H5N2 in poultry farms with chickens and turkeys in British Columbia, Canada. After the disease was detected at a B.C. poultry farm in fall 2014, the Washington State Department of Agriculture increased random testing among poultry flocks in areas near the border with Canada and alerted veterinarians and bird owners around the state.

This heightened awareness led to a report in December 2014 of a gyrfalcon in northwest Washington that died after eating a wild duck. The gyrfalcon, which was legally used for hunting by a Whatcom County falconer was tested and confirmed to have a highly pathogenic H5N8 strain of bird flu.

In addition, a northern pintail duck that was part of a group of waterfowl that died of aspergillosis (an unrelated fungal infection) near Wiser Lake in Whatcom County, tested positive for carrying the HPAI H5N2 bird flu virus.

Both of these strains – H5N2 and H5N8 – have been detected in other parts of the world and have not been found to affect humans.

The common-sense precautions on this page are always recommended to reduce the risk of contracting any wildlife disease.

Bird flu viruses are transmitted among birds through respiratory secretions and fecal droppings. The virus is not easily transmissible

Precautions for avoiding illness from wild birds

While it’s highly unlikely that hunters or people feeding birds could contract avian flu from wild birds here, following these standard precautions reduces the risk of contracting any wildlife disease:

- ✓ Do not harvest or handle wild birds that are obviously sick or found dead.
- ✓ Wear rubber gloves while cleaning game or cleaning bird feeders.
- ✓ Do not eat, drink or smoke while cleaning game.
- ✓ Wash hands with soap and water or alcohol wipes immediately after handling game or cleaning bird feeders.
- ✓ Wash tools and work surfaces used to clean game birds with soap and water, then disinfect with a 10 percent solution of chlorine bleach.
- ✓ Separate raw meat, and anything it touches, from cooked or ready-to-eat foods to avoid contamination.
- ✓ Cook game meat thoroughly, to an internal temperature of 155 to 165 degrees Fahrenheit.



More information on avian flu is available on the following link:
wdfw.wa.gov/factshts/avian_flu.htm

from birds to people, but health officials are concerned that without proper hygiene, it could develop into another form that spreads readily from person to person.

Dogs used in wild bird hunting are not considered at risk of acquiring bird flu, since there have been no documented cases of the virus infecting dogs. There have been cases of cats acquiring the H5N1 strain of bird flu in other parts of the world, but no cats have been documented with the H5N2 or H5N8 strains in North America. Dog and cat owners should consult their veterinarian for more information about influenza in pets.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has been collaborating for the past several

years with the National Wildlife Health Center, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in a nationwide surveillance effort for early detection of highly pathogenic avian influenza in wild birds.

WDFW is part of a state network for collection and testing of dead birds. Die-offs of multiple wild birds should be reported to WDFW by calling 1-800-606-8768. If the bird deaths appear unusual, samples are sent to veterinary laboratories to test for diseases, including bird flu.

From 2005-2011, WDFW tested over 10,000 wild birds for bird flu viruses. Bird flu viruses were found in about 10 percent of all birds tested, but none were associated with any illnesses or mortality.

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Reporting Dead Birds

Report dead waterfowl and raptors by calling

1-800-606-8768