

Avian Influenza: The Facts

Public Health - Factsheet

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza, also called AI, avian flu or bird flu, is a viral infection that can infect all species of birds. Wild birds, particularly ducks and geese, can carry influenza viruses without becoming sick. However, they can spread the virus to other birds, including domestic poultry. In rare cases, mammals, including humans, can catch avian influenza from infected birds.

There are many strains of avian influenza viruses, generally classified into two categories:

- Low pathogenic (LPAI) strains typically cause few or no clinical signs in poultry and may go undetected due to a lack of disease in some species of birds.
- Highly pathogenic (HPAI) strains can cause severe clinical signs and potentially high mortality rates among poultry.

However, the severity of the illness in chickens (i.e. whether the avian influenza virus is considered LPAI or HPAI) does not predict severity in humans. Both LPAI and HPAI viruses have caused mild to severe illness in infected humans.

Health experts around the world watch avian influenza viruses carefully in case they undergo a major change that could allow easier spread amongst humans and could lead to a human pandemic.

Why is avian influenza a concern?

The human health risks associated with avian influenza are:

- Direct infection of humans with the avian influenza virus
- The emergence of a new pandemic strain of type A influenza

For most Manitobans, the risk of getting avian influenza is extremely low. Avian influenza viruses usually do not infect humans and cannot spread easily from person-to-person. However, some avian influenza viruses are more likely to make humans sick than others, and some strains can cause serious illness and even death in humans. Recently there have been increasing reports of wild birds testing positive with HPAI subtype H5N1 throughout North America.

How is avian influenza spread to humans?

In general, the risk to human health from wild birds infected with an avian influenza virus is considered to be low. Although the risk to humans is low, people can become infected with the virus through direct contact

with infected birds, their bodily fluids (such as droppings or blood) or contaminated surfaces, including tools. It is also possible to catch the disease by inhaling infected aerosols or drinking contaminated water. Avian influenza viruses are not usually spread from one person to another.

What are the signs and symptoms of avian influenza in people?

Symptoms of avian influenza are similar to other influenza viruses, including:

- fever, cough, aching muscles, sore throat, and difficulty breathing
- gastrointestinal symptoms including diarrhea, stomach pain and vomiting
- eye irritation, including redness, eye pain/burning, and tearing

What should I do if I have been exposed to sick birds and have symptoms?

Anyone who has been exposed to avian influenza should monitor for symptoms for 10 days after they were last exposed. Contact a health care provider or **Health Links – Info Santé at 204-788-8200 or toll-free at 1-888-315-9257** if you have any of the above symptoms, even if your symptoms are mild, and you have been exposed to infected birds. Your health care provider will assess your symptoms and order further tests to find out what is making you sick. They may also prescribe antiviral medication.

How can I protect myself, my family and others?

It is important to remember that the risk of avian influenza is extremely low; and that the risk of health effects from human influenza is far greater. The best way to protect yourself and others from any influenza virus is to:

- get an influenza vaccine
- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and warm water
- cover your cough
- stay home if you are sick

What if I am living in (or travelling to) an area where avian influenza is a concern?

- avoid high-risk areas such as poultry farms and live animal markets

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- avoid unnecessary contact with birds, including chickens, ducks and wild birds
- avoid surfaces that may have bird droppings or secretions on them
- ensure that all poultry dishes are well cooked, including eggs

Is it safe to eat poultry or eggs?

To date there has been no evidence that eating properly cooked poultry or eggs could spread avian influenza to humans. However, consuming raw or undercooked poultry or eggs may pose a small risk to humans. Viruses (including the influenza virus) are easily killed by heat, so it is important to thoroughly cook all poultry and eggs. This means cooking whole birds to an internal temperature of 82 degrees Celsius (180 degrees Fahrenheit), cooking poultry pieces to an internal temperature of 77 degrees Celsius (170 degrees Fahrenheit), and using pasteurized eggs or cooking eggs until the yolk is no longer runny. Please refer to the Government of Canada's Food Safety website (www.canada.ca/en/services/health/food-safety.html) for further details on safe food handling practices.

Is it safe to drink water?

Generally, treated drinking water is safe to drink. However, untreated open water bodies such as reservoirs, ponds, lakes, and rivers, where waterfowl gather, have the greatest potential for contamination with avian influenza virus and other waterborne diseases. If drinking from one of these untreated sources, it is very important to boil the water prior to consumption.

For more information, please visit:

- **Manitoba Health:**
www.manitoba.ca/health/publichealth/environmentalhealth/avian.html
- **Manitoba Agriculture:**
www.manitoba.ca/agriculture/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-health/avian-influenza-and-your-farm.html
- **Health Canada:**
www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/healthy-living/your-health/diseases/avian-influenza-bird-flu.html
- **Canadian Food Inspection Agency:**
<https://inspection.canada.ca/animal-health/terrestrial-animals/diseases/reportable/avian-influenza/eng/1323990856863/1323991018946>

If you have further questions, you can call Health Links – Info Santé at **204-788-8200** or toll-free at **1-888-315-9257**.