



WHAT OUTDOOR ENTHUSIASTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HIGHLY PATHOGENIC AVIAN INFLUENZA (HPAI H5N1) – THE SO-CALLED “BIRD FLU”

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI H5N1), popularly known as the “bird flu,” has been circulating globally in birds, humans and other mammals. Low-pathogenic avian influenza has existed for years in Ohio’s wild bird populations. The newly arrived highly pathological strain has not yet mutated into a form that is easily spread from birds to humans or from one human to another. However, it is always important to use general precautions when interacting with any wild animals.

- **Is all the concern about avian influenza justified?**

Public health officials around the world are concerned because influenza viruses are constantly changing (genetically mutating) with new strains of flu viruses emerging annually. Some strains of influenza from birds can infect mammals or humans. The worse case scenario would be if a new avian influenza strain mutated and was able to be spread directly from person to person.

- **How does avian influenza spread among birds?**

Infected birds shed influenza virus in their saliva, nasal secretions, and feces. Susceptible birds become infected when they have contact with contaminated excretions or with surfaces that are contaminated with excretions or secretions. Domesticated birds may become infected with avian influenza virus through direct contact with infected waterfowl or infected poultry or through contact with surfaces (such as dirt or cages) or materials (such as water or feed) that have been contaminated with the virus.

- **Is it hazardous to my health to pursue birdwatching as a pastime?**

No. Most human cases have involved direct and close contact with sick birds. Since birding is generally done at a distance, there is little chance of contracting the disease from this activity.

- **What precautions should be employed around domestic and wild birds?**

As a general rule, all wildlife should be observed from a distance. Exercising caution protects against possible exposure to pathogens (microorganisms or viruses) that cause disease, and it minimizes disturbance to the wildlife. Avoid touching wildlife, including wild birds. If there is contact with wildlife, do not rub eyes, eat, drink, or smoke before washing hands with soap and water as described below.

- 1) Thoroughly washing hands with soap and water (or with alcohol-based hand products, if the hands are not visibly soiled) is a very effective method for killing any influenza virus, including HPAI H5N1.
- 2) These viruses are also inactivated with many common disinfectants such as detergents, 10 percent household bleach, rubbing alcohol, and other commercial disinfectants.

- **Can I contract H5N1 from my backyard birdfeeder?**

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At the present time, the risk of becoming infected with H5N1 virus from bird feeders is low. Generally, perching birds (Passeriformes) are the predominant type of birds at feeders. While there are documented cases of HPAI H5N1 causing death in some Passeriformes (e.g., house sparrow, Eurasian tree-sparrow, house finch) in both free-ranging and experimental settings, most of the wild birds that are traditionally associated with avian influenza viruses are waterfowl and shore birds.

- **Can the many Canada geese found in urban settings be H5N1 carriers?**

Canada geese can be carriers of HPAI H5N1. It is best to observe these birds at a distance and to avoid any type of contact with their feces. Bird droppings can carry a variety of pathogens and should always be avoided.

- **What should I do if I find a dead bird in my yard?**

Wild birds die for many different reasons, including other diseases, animal attacks and poisoning. Finding a dead bird in your yard does not mean it has avian influenza.

The Ohio Department of Health is continuing to test dead blue jays, crows, and songbirds for West Nile virus. These birds are not considered a primary risk for avian influenza. Birds that die on or after April 17 may be submitted for testing via your local health department. Contact your local health department to determine if they are gathering dead birds for testing.

If you find several dead ducks, geese, or shorebirds in your yard, contact your district wildlife office or 1-800-WILDLIFE. If you keep backyard poultry and the flock experiences unusual deaths, contact your local veterinarian to rule out other possible diagnoses.

- **How do I dispose of a dead bird I found in my yard?**

Never handle dead animals or birds with your bare hands. Rubber gloves should be worn when handling any dead bird. If rubber gloves are not available, turning a plastic bag inside out, inserting a hand, grasping the dead bird, then turning the bag right side out is recommended. Dead birds should be placed in a plastic bag (garbage or trash) of sufficient size and thickness to hold the birds and not rip. The bag should then be tightly knotted shut, placed in another identical bag and tightly knotted shut.

- **My cat/dog ate a dead bird. Should I be concerned?**

Contact your local veterinarian if you have concerns about your pet killing a bird, eating a dead wild bird, or killing/eating poultry. If your veterinarian feels that your pet is at risk for avian influenza, the Ohio Department of Agriculture can test for avian influenza at no charge. However, if a differential diagnosis is required, there is a charge for that service.

More information on highly pathogenic avian influenza HPAI H5N1 is available at: USGS National Wildlife Health Center

http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/disease_information/avian_influenza/index.jsp