

September 1, 2021

## **Avian Influenza Update for Small Flock Owners and Bird Fanciers**

People who raise small flocks or game birds for personal or limited commercial purposes should be aware of the risk of infectious poultry diseases such as avian influenza (AI) to their birds' health. AI can infect domestic and wild birds, including chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quails, ducks, geese, and guinea fowl.

**There is an increased risk of AI infection to poultry flocks and game birds during autumn wild bird migration.**

If you are concerned about your health or if you develop influenza-like symptoms after working with sick birds please contact your health care provider.

There is no evidence that AI can be transmitted to humans through the consumption of contaminated poultry products. Safe handling of raw meat and other raw food ingredients, thorough cooking and good kitchen hygiene can prevent or reduce the risks posed by contaminated food.

Avian influenza viruses are either **high or low pathogenic viruses** (HPAI and LPAI, respectively) depending on the molecular characteristic of the virus and its ability to cause disease and mortality in chickens.

Poultry infected with LPAI viruses may show mild signs of the disease or none. Infections caused by HPAI can cause death. Both HPAI and LPAI can spread quickly through flocks. Low pathogenic AI viruses can mutate into highly pathogenic strains, which is why it is important that outbreaks are managed promptly.

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Birds become infected when they have direct contact with the discharge from the eyes and nostrils or feces of infected birds, or with contaminated surfaces or infected food and water supplies. It is important that small flock owners implement and maintain effective biosecurity measures. Also, it is important to identify that free range and backyard flocks and poultry holdings or any other production systems near wetlands without strong biosecurity measures in place are most at risk. The risk is considered to be lower for indoor poultry holdings.

Birds with outdoor access should not share areas with wild ducks, geese, turkeys or shorebirds. Make sure free-range areas do not attract wild waterfowl as ponds or open feeders may become contaminated with wild waterfowl droppings.

Infectious poultry diseases are most often transmitted from one infected flock to another flock by infected birds, people or equipment. Moving infected birds can result in the transmission of AI virus to a new location or flock. During an AI outbreak, introducing new birds or attending poultry events can increase the risk of spreading AI. If infected birds are moved through an auction, show, competition or “swap meet”, then the AI virus can be transferred to multiple new locations. Birds that appear to be healthy can be infected and can transmit AI to other birds before exhibiting any signs of disease themselves.

Be very diligent in observing your birds. Track illnesses and deaths and feed and water consumption. Early detection is critical. Monitor your birds for signs of disease such as depression, decreased feed consumption, drop in egg production, swollen wattles, sneezing, gasping, a discharge from the nose or eyes, diarrhea or sudden death.

**If you have any concerns regarding the health status of your flock, contact your veterinarian immediately. Key steps to reduce the risk of AI infection in your flock include:**

- Adopt appropriate management measures to increase biosecurity including:
  - Prevent direct contact between wild water birds and poultry (by using nets or keeping poultry indoors during peak influenza season) and ensure that poultry do not have access to water and feed accessible to wild birds.
  - Avoid attending shows, sales, competitions and swap meets during a disease outbreak and do not allow people who have recently been in contact with other birds (e.g., their own or attending a bird sale or show) to enter the housing area or handle your birds.
  - Keep new birds or those returning from shows separate, preferably in a different air space (isolated) for at least 2-4 weeks after returning home and monitor them for signs of illness.
  - Clean and disinfect the cages and equipment used for these birds.

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- Use separate clothing, footwear and equipment for isolated birds, and handle them last. If the same equipment and clothing must be used, clean and disinfect them before and after handling the birds. Wash your hands between the two groups.
- Keep a logbook. If you add new birds to your flock, at any time, make sure that you get their complete background information, including a history of any diseases and vaccinations. Keep the vendor's contact information in the event that your birds become sick, so they can be traced to their flock of origin.

Additional information is available at:

- <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/livestock/poultry/smallflock.html>
- <http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/organic/news/2015/2015-02a2.htm>
- <http://inspection.gc.ca/animals/terrestrial-animals/diseases/bird-health-basics/eng/1323643634523/1323644740109>
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