

Animal health update: Avian influenza for small flock owners and bird fanciers

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Avian influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease that can infect domestic and wild birds, including chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quails, ducks, geese, pigeons, psittacines and guinea fowl.

On March 27, 2022, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) reported highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), subtype H5N1, in a poultry flock located in southern Ontario.

The risk of AI outbreaks occurring within Ontario is currently high because of it being carried by migrating birds.

It is strongly recommended that small flock owners and owners of exhibition birds avoid attending poultry events (shows, swaps and sales) during this high-risk transmission period for AI.

Avian influenza is not a threat to food safety and Ontario poultry and eggs are safe to eat when proper handling and cooking takes place. Avian influenza is not a significant public health concern for healthy people that are not in routine contact with infected birds. People working with poultry are strongly encouraged to follow all public health guidelines and maintain strict biosecurity.

Avian influenza

This virus is carried in free-flying waterfowls such as ducks, geese and shorebirds. Infected birds may shed the virus in their feces, contaminating the environment. The

virus can survive for days in litter, feed, water, soil, dead birds, feathers and on the surface of eggs.

The AI virus is classified based on the ability to make birds sick:

- Highly pathogenic (HPAI) viruses cause severe clinical signs and significant mortality
- Low pathogenic (LPAI) viruses cause mild or no clinical signs and low mortality

Both HPAI and LPAI viruses can spread quickly through flocks. LPAI viruses can mutate into highly pathogenic strains, which is why it is important that AI outbreaks are managed promptly. Certain strains of AI (H5 and H7) are federally reportable diseases under the *Health of Animals Act* because they have the potential to spread quickly within domestic and wild bird populations, they often result in severe disease and high mortality in infected flocks, they disrupt international trade and they could possibly be transmitted to people.

What you can do

Birds with outdoor access should not share areas with wild ducks, geese, or shorebirds. Make sure free-range areas do not have attractions for wild waterfowl, such as a pond or open feeders, which may become contaminated with wild waterfowl droppings.

Be very diligent in observing your birds. Monitor mortalities and track feed and water consumption. Watch for any signs of disease, such as decreased feed and water consumption, depression, drop in egg production, swollen wattles, sneezing, gasping, discharges from the nose or eyes, diarrhea, or sudden death.

Early detection is critical. Should you suspect any signs of health concerns in your flock, contact your veterinarian immediately. A list of available veterinarian clinics that treat small flock poultry species in Ontario is [here](#).

Anyone who finds a sick or dead wild bird is encouraged to contact the [Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative](#) (CWHC). Do not touch that bird! Be prepared to submit details like where you found the bird or discuss options for carcass submission to allow the CWHC to gather information about the health of wild populations. It is recommended to take the following steps:

Prevention is the key.

- **Avoid attending shows, sales, and swap meets during high-risk periods, such as spring and fall wild bird migration periods, and especially during any disease outbreak.**

- Do not allow people who have recently been in contact with other birds (for example, their own or attending a bird sale or show) near your birds and do not share equipment with other bird owners.
- At any time, if you add new birds to your flock, make sure you get their complete background information, including a history of any diseases and vaccinations. Keep the vendor's contact information so that if your birds become sick they can be traced to their flock of origin.
- Keep new birds or those returning from shows separate and in a different airspace (isolated) for at least 4 weeks after returning home and monitor them for signs of illness. Clean and disinfect the cages and equipment used for these birds. Use separate clothing, footwear and equipment for quarantined 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.

HPAI Detections in Canada

HPAI subtype H5N1 was first detected in Canada on December 20, 2021, in Newfoundland and Labrador. Since that time, further cases have been detected in domestic flocks in Nova Scotia and in wild birds in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, British Columbia, and most recently in Ontario.

For further information on AI cases in domestic poultry go to the CFIA's website: [Avian Influenza \(bird flu\) - Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#).

For AI virus detection in wild birds, visit the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (CWHC) at [CWHC: Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative](#).

Risk of spread for small flocks and exhibition birds

People who raise small flocks or game birds for personal or limited commercial purposes should be aware of the risk to their birds from diseases such as AI. **Attending poultry events can increase the risk of spreading disease.** AI viruses can be brought into a poultry barn by breaches in biosecurity and can be transmitted from one infected flock to another by movement of infected birds and/or carrying the virus from the contaminated environment on equipment or clothing and footwear. Bringing an infected bird to a poultry show, auction or swap meet can rapidly spread AI to other susceptible birds. Purchasing infected birds or bringing an infected bird into your flock and not following basic biosecurity practices such as isolating incoming birds can rapidly spread the AI virus within your flock. If AI infected birds are moved through an auction or swap meet, then the AI virus can be transferred to multiple new locations. Birds that appear to be healthy can be carriers of the virus and can transmit AI to other birds before exhibiting any signs of disease themselves.

Additional resources

Additional information is available at:

- [Raise healthy small flock poultry](#)
- [Chick Days and a Free Biosecurity Kit for Your Poultry](#)
- [Small Flock Poultry Health Topics for Flock Owners: Video Series with Dr. Victoria Bowes - Ontario Animal Health Network](#)
- [How to prevent and detect disease in backyard flocks and pet birds - Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#)
- [Wild birds](#)
- [Cooking and food preparation](#)
- [USDA APHIS - 2022 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza](#)
- [Defend the Flock - Resource Centre](#)
- [Defend the Flock Program](#)