

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

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Overview

Avian influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease that can infect domestic and wild birds, including:

- chickens
- turkeys
- pheasants
- quail
- ducks
- geese
- pigeons
- psittacines
- guinea fowl
- shorebirds

Infected birds may shed the virus in their feces, thus contaminating the environment. The virus can survive for days in litter, feed, water, soil, dead birds, feathers and on the surface of eggs.

Avian influenza is not a threat to food safety. Ontario poultry and eggs are safe to eat when, as always, proper cooking along with safe and sanitary handling takes place. The risk of transmission to humans is very low. People working with poultry should take additional precautions and are strongly encouraged to follow all public health guidelines and maintain strict biosecurity. 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 an increased risk of avian influenza infection to poultry flocks during autumn wild bird migrations. Measures taken at this time to improve biosecurity, including avoiding contact with wild birds, may reduce the likelihood of exposure to your flock.

Current situation

Outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 strain continue to be reported in commercial poultry flocks in Canada with the most recent detection on August 1st, 2022 in a domestic flock in Quebec. To date, nine provinces have reported cases of HPAI in domestic poultry. Proper biosecurity measures remain flock owners' best defence against the spread of HPAI.

The Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative (CWHC) continues to detect positive HPAI virus in wild birds across the country. As of August 11, 2022, CWHC has reported 1037 HPAI-positive detections in wild birds in Canada. Between March 10 and August 11, 2022, HPAI was detected in a total of 96 birds in Ontario, including:

- Turkey vulture
- Snowy and Great Horned owl
- American white pelican
- Ring-billed gull
- Canada goose
- Wood duck
- Bald eagle
- Red-tailed hawk
- Common raven
- American crow

Persistence of the HPAI virus, mainly the H5N1 serotype, indicates that the infection may have widely spread in wild birds. This means that the health risk from this HPAI virus family is now a year-round threat to domestic poultry and wildlife.

Clinical signs

Please continue to be diligent when observing your birds for any signs of disease, which can include:

- decreased feed and water consumption
- depression
- drop in egg production
- swollen wattles
- sneezing
- gasping
- discharges from the nose or eyes
- diarrhea
- sudden death

Early detection is critical. Should you suspect any signs of health concerns in your flock, contact your veterinarian immediately. A list of Poultry Veterinarians can be searched on [College of Veterinarians of Ontario's website](#). Bird owners are legally responsible to notify their veterinarian or the nearest CFIA Animal Health district if there is suspicion of avian influenza in their flock.

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 them to gather information about the health of wild populations.

Biosecurity

People who raise small flocks or game birds for personal or limited commercial purposes should be aware of the risks of diseases such as AI to their birds. **During an AI outbreak, attending poultry events can increase the risk of spreading diseases.** AI virus can be transmitted from one infected flock to another by movement of infected birds and/or breaches in biosecurity, such as transferring the

virus from a contaminated environment to a clean environment via equipment and/or clothing and footwear.

Prevention

Prevention is key. Take the following steps:

- It is recommended that during **high-risk periods for transmission of AI (including spring and fall wild bird migration periods) and especially during a disease outbreak to avoid commingling activities** such as shows, sales, competitions and swap meets and/or allowing people who have recently been in contact with other birds to enter the housing area or handle birds.
- It is also strongly recommended to avoid sending birds to poultry exhibitions to help reduce the potential introduction of avian influenza virus in poultry flocks.
- Any time you add new birds to your flock, it is recommended to get their complete background information, including a history of any diseases and vaccinations and keep the vendor's contact information in case your birds become sick, to allow for traceability to their flock of origin.
- Keep new birds or those returning from shows separate and in a different airspace (isolated) for at least four 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 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.
- Birds with outdoor access should not share areas with wild ducks, geese or shorebirds and 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.

Additional information

OMAFRA

[Avian Influenza](#)

[Raise healthy small flock poultry](#)

[Chick Days and a Free Biosecurity Kit for Your Poultry](#)

Ontario Animal Health Network

[Small Flock Poultry Health Topics for Flock Owners: Video Series with Dr. Victoria Bowes - Ontario Animal Health Network](#)

CFIA

[Avian influenza \(bird flu\) - Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#)

[How to prevent and detect disease in small flocks and pet birds - Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#)

[Avian Biosecurity – Protect Poultry, Prevent Disease - Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#)

[Cleaning and disinfection process for premises declared infected with highly pathogenic avian influenza \(HPAI\) - Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#)

[National Avian Influenza - Wild Positives](#)

Ministry of Health

[Avian Influenza - Emergency Planning and Preparedness - Programs and Services - Health Care Professionals - MOH](#)