

Poultry Specialists Remind Producers & Small-Flock Owners Of **Avian Flu Risk**

Late fall and winter are considered flu season, but not just for humans. Poultry specialists in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences point out that the threat of avian influenza also is heightened at this time of year.

Experts explain that the H5N2 virus that caused an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian flu earlier this year and led to the loss of more than 48 million birds -- mostly turkeys and laying chickens on commercial poultry farms in the Midwest -- survives best in cooler temperatures.

And although Pennsylvania has been spared from the virus so far, the seasonal, southward migration of the wild waterfowl that can carry the disease -- as well as the northward migration that will begin in late winter -- could result in the virus popping up in Pennsylvania at any time, putting at risk the state's multibillion-dollar poultry industry.

So what should you look for to detect a possible case of avian flu? What should you do if you think you see one? And how can you protect your flock from infection? The Penn State Extension Poultry Team, which includes poultry and veterinary researchers and extension educators, provided answers to these commonly asked questions:

--What are the signs of illness in poultry infected with avian influenza?

Low pathogenic avian influenza symptoms typically are mild. Infected birds can show signs of decreased feed consumption, respiratory illness (coughing and sneezing) and decreased egg production. There may be slightly increased mortality. Birds that are infected with highly pathogenic avian flu (often referred to as HPAI) are severely ill, and sudden deaths can be the first and only signs noticed.

Birds also may exhibit one or more of the following symptoms: lack of energy and appetite, decreased egg production, soft-shelled or misshapen eggs, swelling of facial tissues, dark red to purple discoloration and/or blistering of the comb, dark red areas on the scales of the legs, nasal discharge, coughing, sneezing, lack of coordination, abnormal head and neck positions, or diarrhea.

The wild ducks and other waterfowl that may spread the virus often do not get sick or show symptoms.

--How can I protect my birds from getting avian flu?

Follow common-sense biosecurity practices that isolate your flock from other birds. Also particularly important is keeping your birds away from any possible contact with wild waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans) and shore birds (gulls, terns), and the water sources where these wild birds

congregate. Ideally, you should not raise land birds -- such as chickens, turkeys, guinea fowl or pheasants (birds with beaks) -- together with aquatic birds, such as ducks, geese and swans (birds with bills). This will help prevent the introduction and spread of avian flu viruses.

On its "Biosecurity for Birds" website (<http://healthybirds.aphis.usda.gov>), the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends these six basic steps to keep birds healthy:

1. Keep your distance -- Isolate your birds from visitors and other birds.
2. Keep it clean -- Prevent germs from spreading by cleaning shoes, tools and equipment.
3. Don't haul disease home -- Also clean vehicles and cages.
4. Don't borrow disease from your neighbor -- Avoid sharing tools and equipment with neighbors.
5. Know the warning signs of infectious bird diseases -- Watch for early signs to prevent the spread of disease.
6. Report sick birds -- Report unusual signs of disease or unexpected deaths.

--As a small flock owner, I give my birds good feed and water, and they have ample space to roam, both inside and outside. Won't that protect them from HPAI?

No. This is an equal opportunity disease. If any susceptible birds of the right species and age are exposed to an infectious dose of HPAI virus, they will get sick and most will die from the infection. This is true for very small flocks, pastured flocks, large commercial flocks in total confinement, and every type of operation and management style in between.

--What should I do when I suspect I have a health problem in my poultry flock?

If birds are dying, the dead should be double-bagged and refrigerated for possible testing. Meanwhile, until the problem is investigated, diagnosed and/or resolved, put your flock on "voluntary quarantine." This means operating as a closed flock: Do not buy, sell, trade or otherwise move birds to or from your premise. Do not visit other flocks, poultry auctions, shows or bring in visitors that have their own birds. These measures will help prevent potential disease-causing agents from being transmitted to other flocks and keep new agents from being introduced into your flock.

--How do I report a suspected case of avian flu?

The Pennsylvania Animal Diagnostic Laboratory System has several university-based veterinarians with advanced training and expertise in poultry diseases. They deal with all types of avian health problems, from the common to the unusual. Contact the lab nearer to your location:

Penn State Animal Diagnostic Laboratory, University Park, Centre County, 814-863-0837.

New Bolton Center Laboratory of Avian Medicine and Pathology, University of Pennsylvania, Kennett Square, Chester County, 610-444-5800, ext. 6710.

You also can call the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture at 717-772-2852 (24 hours a day) or the USDA Healthy Birds Hotline at 866-536-7593.

--Is this strain of avian flu a threat to human health?

This is not human flu, and there currently is no evidence that this virus is infecting humans. However, a person should always practice good personal biosecurity while working with poultry. This includes wearing washable shoes and clothing, and washing hands after working with poultry or feed. Washing boots before entering poultry housing helps keep germs from entering the structure.

--Can I get avian influenza from eating poultry or eggs?

No. Poultry and eggs that are properly prepared and cooked are safe to eat. Proper processing, handling and cooking of poultry will provide protection from viruses and bacteria, including avian influenza.

--Where can I learn more?

More information can be found at the Penn State Extension Poultry Team avian flu website at <http://extension.psu.edu/animals/poultry/topics/health-and-diseases/avian-influenza>.

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