

Avian influenza (bird flu): poultry and bird facts

George Arzey

Senior Veterinary Officer, Avian Health, Animal and Plant Biosecurity, EMAI

Defining avian influenza

Avian influenza (also known as 'bird flu' or 'avian flu') is an infectious viral disease of birds which can on rare occasions also cause disease in humans. Usually the virus circulates in wild waterfowl populations, causing no disease or only mild disease.

There are a number of different subtypes of avian influenza, only a few of which can cause disease in humans. There is currently no evidence of these subtypes in either birds or humans in Australia.

Types of avian influenza viruses

There are many subtypes of avian influenza viruses. Most of them do not cause disease. The subtype that is currently causing widespread disease in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Africa is H5N1. This subtype has never been found in Australia.

On rare occasions subtypes of avian influenza that are not known to cause disease (low pathogenic) have been found in waterfowl in Australia. This is in contrast to other parts of the world where these low pathogenic subtypes of the virus are very common, particularly in waterfowl.

Types of birds that can be infected

Avian influenza can infect a very wide range of birds including chickens, turkeys, quails, guinea fowl, partridges, pheasants, emus, ostriches and a large number of aviary and wild birds, especially waterfowl such as ducks, geese and swans.

Clinical signs in birds

The clinical signs are variable depending on factors such as the type of bird, the virus subtype and the presence of other diseases.

Infected birds may die shortly after acquiring the infection with no obvious clinical illness, or they may show a variety of clinical signs including severe depression, loss of appetite, sudden drop in egg numbers or sudden change in egg colour, decreased vocalisation, flaccid pale combs or very dark combs and wattles, breathing difficulties, coughing, swollen heads and purplish patches on the legs and unfeathered skin.

Nervous signs such as tremors of the head, unsteady gate, twisted necks and other unusual positions of the head and body also occur, particularly in waterfowl.

The clinical signs of avian influenza are not specific and may be seen in a range of other bird diseases. However, a combination of mortalities, egg production problems, nervous signs and respiratory distress in a group of birds should be investigated immediately by a veterinarian.

Australia's history of avian influenza

Australia has had five outbreaks of avian influenza in chickens between 1976 and 1997. The outbreaks were in Victoria (3), Queensland (1) and NSW (1).

None of the outbreaks was caused by the H5N1 subtype, and all were successfully eradicated. They were caused by infection with the H7 subtype of avian influenza. None of the outbreaks originated from migratory birds.

The risk to Australia

The risk of avian influenza (H5N1) spreading to Australia remains very low.

However, the H5N1 strain could enter the country through:



- illegal importations of birds and their products;
- accidental introduction by overseas visitors, i.e. visitors who are infected with the virus or who have been in contact with infected birds and are wearing contaminated clothing;
- Migration of infected wild birds.

Risk from migrating wild birds

To date there is no evidence that Australia is at risk through wild bird migration. Other countries on the Australian migration route, including New Zealand, New Guinea, Taiwan and the Philippines, also remain free from the H5N1 strain.

Ducks and geese are the recognised spreaders of avian influenza in birds, but Australian ducks and geese are not migratory and rarely leave the continent.

International situation

The strain of H5N1 that is now found in many parts of the world is an altered form of the virus that emerged in China in 1996. Since the emergence of this strain, a small number of human cases and deaths have been confirmed in people who had close contact with chickens or infected poultry environments. There is currently no evidence of effective human-to-human spread.

It is important not to confuse human cases of avian influenza with cases of the winter human flu. The human flu is a common respiratory disease that spreads rapidly from person to person and kills thousands of people every year.

Situation in NSW

NSW Department of Primary Industries (NSW DPI) is working closely with the public and poultry and egg industries to increase general awareness of the risks of avian influenza, and to encourage improved biosecurity on farms

DPI staff are also training and distributing information to private vets, wildlife organisations, bird fanciers, the public and other specialist bird industry groups, to help them protect the health of their birds.

Bird owners and the general community are being encouraged to report mysterious multiple deaths or birds showing suspicious symptoms as described above.

Closely monitoring the health of your birds is important for early detection before the disease has a chance to spread widely.

Maintenance of good biosecurity and a high level of hygiene are recommended.

Report any unusual sickness to:

- your local vet,
- your Rural Lands Protection Board (RLPB),
- NSW Department of Primary Industries, or
- the emergency animal disease hotline on 1800 675 888.

More information

- www.dpi.nsw.gov.au
- www.health.nsw.gov.au
- www.outbreak.gov.au
- www.who.int
- www.foodauthority.nsw.gov.au

All media enquiries on this topic should be directed to Public Affairs and Media staff on 02 6391 3312 or 02 6391 3311.

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Check for updates of this Primefact at:
www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/primefacts

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