

Questions and Answers: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

Q. What is highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI)?

A. Worldwide, there are many strains of avian influenza (AI) virus that can cause varying amounts of clinical illness in poultry. HPAI is an extremely infectious and fatal form of the disease that, once established, can spread rapidly from flock to flock.

Q. How is it spread?

A. Exposure of poultry to migratory waterfowl and the international movement of poultry, poultry equipment, and people pose risks for introducing HPAI into U.S. poultry. Once introduced, the disease can be spread from bird to bird by direct contact. HPAI viruses can also be spread by manure, equipment, vehicles, egg flats, crates, and people whose clothing or shoes have come in contact with the virus. HPAI viruses can remain viable at moderate temperatures for long periods in the environment and can survive indefinitely in frozen material. One gram of contaminated manure can contain enough virus to infect one million birds.

Q. Do we have HPAI in the United States?

A. No, we do not.

Q. What is the difference between HPAI and low pathogenic avian influenza?

A. AI viruses can be classified into low pathogenic and highly pathogenic forms based on the severity of the illness they cause. Most AI virus strains are low pathogenic and typically cause few or no clinical signs in infected birds.

Q. What are the signs of HPAI?

A. The clinical signs of birds affected with HPAI are one or more of the following:

- Sudden death without clinical signs
- Lack of energy and appetite
- Decreased egg production
- Soft-shelled or misshapen eggs
- Swelling of the head, eyelids, comb, wattles, and hocks

- Purple discoloration of the wattles, combs, and legs
- Nasal discharge
- Coughing, sneezing
- Lack of coordination
- Diarrhea

Q. What is the threat to human health?

A. In some instances, strains of HPAI viruses can be infectious to people. Since mid-December 2003, a growing number of Asian countries have reported outbreaks of HPAI in chickens and ducks. The rapid spread of HPAI, with outbreaks occurring at the same time, is historically unprecedented and of growing concern for human health as well as for animal health. Of great concern to the World Health Organization (WHO) is the possibility that the present situation, if the virus acquires human influenza genes, can give rise to human-to-human transmission and possibly another influenza pandemic in people.

Q. Is there a threat to American poultry from the avian flu in Southeast Asia?

A. To prevent HPAI from being introduced into the United States, USDA has temporarily banned importation of birds and bird products. Additionally, APHIS and State veterinarians specially trained to diagnose foreign animal diseases regularly conduct field investigations of suspicious disease conditions. This surveillance is assisted by university personnel, State animal health officials, USDA-accredited veterinarians, and members of industry who report suspicious cases. APHIS and State animal health officials work cooperatively with the poultry industry to conduct surveillance at breeding flocks, slaughter plants, live-bird markets, livestock auctions, and poultry dealers.

Q. What is different about this bird flu outbreak?

A. The bird flu outbreak in Southeast Asia is on a very large scale, something not seen before. The fear is that the flu could mutate by swapping genes with a human influenza virus to create a dangerous new strain that could pass from human to human.

Q. Can travelers bring AI into the country?

A. While it is very unlikely, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has put out a travel advisory for Americans traveling to the affected countries. It is important for people traveling to countries that have confirmed cases of HPAI to avoid contact with poultry farms, to stay away from live bird markets, and to

avoid contact with items or surfaces that may have been contaminated with feces or manure from infected birds.

Q. What are the potential economic ramifications if an HPAI outbreak should occur in the United States?

A. An HPAI outbreak in the United States could potentially cost the U.S. poultry industry millions of dollars in losses. The 1983–84 HPAI outbreak in the Northeast United States cost nearly \$65 million, and meant the destruction of 17 million birds.

Q. Are poultry products from Asia allowed into the United States?

A. No, as of February 4, 2004, there is a ban on bird and bird products from Southeast Asian countries affected by the HPAI virus. Processed avian products from these countries must have an import permit and government certification of treatment. Pet and performing birds of U.S. origin returning from Southeast Asia will be allowed into the United States with a permit and a 30-day quarantine in a USDA facility.

Q. What can producers do to keep their farms safe?

A. Poultry producers should strengthen biosecurity practices to prevent the introduction of HPAI and other poultry disease into their flocks such as:

- Keep an “all-in, all-out” philosophy of flock management.
- Protect poultry flocks from coming into contact with wild or migratory birds. Keep poultry away from any source of water that may have been contaminated by wild birds.
- Permit only essential workers and vehicles to enter the farm.
- Provide clean clothing and disinfection facilities for employees.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect equipment and vehicles (including tires and undercarriage) entering and leaving the farm.
- Do not loan to, or borrow equipment or vehicles from, other farms.
- Avoid visiting other poultry farms. If you do visit another farm or live-bird market, change footwear and clothing before working with your own flock.
- Do not bring birds from slaughter channels, especially live-bird markets, back to the farm.

Q. What should a producer do if birds appear to have signs of HPAI?

A. If birds exhibit clinical signs of HPAI or may have been exposed to birds with the disease, immediately notify Federal or State animal health officials. Information about HPAI is available at (301) 734–8073.

Q. Were the recent outbreaks of avian influenza in Virginia, Connecticut, and Rhode Island related to the outbreak in Asia?

A. In 2003, the United States had outbreaks of low pathogenic avian influenza in Connecticut and Rhode Island, and in 2002, there was an outbreak in Virginia. This low pathogenic form of the disease causes few or no symptoms in birds, and is related to, but is a significantly different version of the disease now in Asia. In Connecticut, APHIS and the State are using a successful strategy of controlled depopulation and vaccination to halt the spread of the disease. Ongoing surveillance has shown no evidence of the virus since June 2003. In Rhode Island, a single flock became infected with low pathogenic AI in April 2003. That flock has been quarantined and the outbreak has been contained.

Q. Where can I obtain more information?

A. For additional information about U.S. origin pet birds and avian products call the APHIS National Center for Import and Export at (301) 734–3277, or see the APHIS web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov> (click on “hot issues”). For information on avian flu in humans see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/htm>.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA’s TARGET Center at (202) 720–2600 (voice and TDD).

To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326–W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250–9410 or call (202) 720–5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.