



# Avian Influenza

Last update: 2025-07-04

## Key facts

- Avian influenza, or bird flu, is a viral infection caused by influenza type A viruses. Notable strains include H5N1 and H7N9, which can cause severe illness in humans.
- There are many different influenza (flu) viruses, and they often circulate at the same time. Also, some are seasonal, circulating among humans, while others may be zoonotic, transmitted from birds and pigs. Avian influenza, or "bird flu", is the influenza virus that affects birds. Some avian influenza viruses have developed the ability to infect other animals too. Very rarely, an avian flu virus will infect a person who has very close contact with birds.
- Usually, humans cannot spread avian flu from one person to another. However, there is a small chance the virus can adapt in such a way that it becomes easy for people to spread the virus from person to person. This is dangerous because people would not have any immunity to this virus as they have never been exposed to it before. It could spread quickly and the whole population would be vulnerable to getting sick. This makes avian influenza of eminent pandemic potential.
- Avian Influenza (especially the strains of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza [HPAI]) often has devastating economic losses and consequences for the poultry industry, farmer's livelihoods, international trade, and the health of wild birds.

## Transmission

- Direct contact or handling an infected bird (or other infected animals, especially those that eat wild birds)
  - For example, if a person touches an infected bird and then touches their own nose, mouth or eyes, the virus can spread to the person
- Indirect contact with the environment that has been contaminated with bodily fluids, feathers or eggs from an infected bird(s) (or other infected animal).
- Though it is not common, there is the chance the virus could mutate once a human has been affected. If this happens, human-to-human transmission (same as seasonal influenza transmission) is possible.
- Contact with infected wild birds (or other infected animal)
- Ingesting infected under-cooked poultry products.

## Most Vulnerable to contracting the disease:

- People who are in close and repeated contact with infected birds (or other infected animals) or heavily contaminated environments are at risk for acquiring avian influenza. These may include:
  - Poultry farmers and workers: High exposure risk due to close contact with birds.
  - Veterinarians and animal health workers: Risk from handling and treating birds.
  - Residents near poultry farms/markets: Increased risk due to proximity to infected birds.
  - Healthcare workers: Risk from treating infected patients, especially without PPE.
- Due to outbreaks of various subtypes of the avian influenza virus which increases the risk of mutation and spread to humans, the disease continues to be a global public health concern

## Signs and Symptoms

### In birds:

- sudden death with little to no clinical signs
- Discharge from the nose and eyes,
- coughing,
- Difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath
- swelling of the sinuses and/or head,
- apathy,
- reduced vocalisation,
- marked reduction in feed and water intake,
- cyanosis of the unfeathered skin, wattles and comb
- incoordination and nervous signs and diarrhoea

### In humans:

- Mild to moderate
  - Fever
  - Cough
  - Sore throat
  - Muscle aches
  - Inflammation and redness of the eyes
- Severe
  - Pneumonia
  - Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) - causing extreme difficulty in breathing
  - Failure of several organs
  - Death

# What can you do to prevent and control an epidemic?

## Monitoring the community and identifying birds and people

- Identify and isolate sick birds and people before they spread the disease to others
- Investigation must be done in both animal and human populations, and health workers in both sectors should work together and share information.
- People should stay away from areas known to be affected by animal influenza viruses, including farms, contaminated areas, sick or dead animals, wild birds, and settings where live animals may be sold or slaughtered
- The public should strictly avoid contact with sick or dead animals of unknown causes, including wild birds. Identify and report dead animals or request their removal by contacting local wildlife or veterinary authorities
- Advise people to stay away from areas known to be affected by avian influenza (including farms, contaminated areas, sick or dead birds, wild birds, and settings where live birds may be sold or slaughtered)

## Treatment and management

- Referral of serious cases
  - In birds; sudden death of no apparent causes to animal health professionals
  - In humans; (example: high fever, difficulty breathing, rapid respirations) to health facilities

## Safe shelters and spaces

- Reduce overcrowding and improve ventilation in living shelters, workplaces, and schools if possible

## Hand and respiratory hygiene

- Promote good hand hygiene (handwashing with soap)
- Promote respiratory hygiene and coughing etiquette (cover your cough or sneeze using your sleeve or a tissue, wash hands after coughing or sneezing, do not spit onto the ground or in public)
- Use personal protection (for example, face mask)

## Social mobilization and behaviour change

- Find out the specific advice being given by health and other relevant authorities in animal health

- Promote recommended health practices (such as social distancing)
- Model following this advice and inform community members of current health practice advice
- Offer support and encouragement to follow the advice
  - Try to gain understanding about if and why health practice advice is not being followed
  - With the guidance of your supervisor and health authorities, work with communities to overcome barriers to following health advice and recommended practices

## Mapping and community assessment

- Make a map of the community.
- Mark the following information on the map:
  - How many people and birds have fallen sick with avian influenza? Where?
  - How many people and birds have died? Where? When?
  - Who and where are the vulnerable people?
  - Where are the local health facilities and services? (include traditional healers)
  - Where are the local poultry farms or bird markets? (include markets that sell live and dead birds)
- Record the following information on the back of the map:
  - When did people start to fall sick with avian influenza?
  - How many people live in the affected community?
    - How many people work directly with birds on poultry farms, in markets, etc?
  - How common is it for people to live together in crowded spaces? Is there ventilation and fresh air in homes, schools and workplaces?
  - Are children badly affected by avian influenza? Are there other groups (specific ages, occupations, geographic areas, etc.) that are badly affected?
  - Do any animal health agencies, veterinarians or agriculture ministry agencies work in the area?
  - What are the community's habits, practices and beliefs about caring for and feeding sick people? Consider any differences in roles and responsibilities between women and men.
    - When babies and infants are sick, do women continue to breastfeed them?
  - Is a social mobilization or health promotion programme in place?
  - Which sources do people use/trust the most for information?
    - Are there rumours or misinformation about avian influenza? What are the rumours

## Other resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); [Prevention and Antiviral Treatment of Avian Influenza A Viruses in People](#) (2024)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); [Avian Influenza in Birds: Causes and How It Spreads](#) (2024)

- World Health Organization (WHO); [Influenza: Avian](#) (2024)
- World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH); [Avian Influenza](#) (n.d.)
- World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH); [Avian Influenza](#) (2009)