



# AVIAN INFLUENZA GUIDANCE

Compiled November 2022

## WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

Avian influenza (bird flu) is a disease caused by influenza type A viruses (such as H5N1) usually carried in wild birds. Infected birds can spread the virus through their nasal secretions (mucous), saliva or faeces (droppings). These viruses occur naturally among wild aquatic birds (like ducks and geese) and can infect domestic poultry (like chickens and guinea fowl) and other bird and animal species. While most wild birds can be infected with avian influenza viruses but do not usually get sick, poultry may get very sick and die. Outbreaks of avian influenza in bird populations happen from time to time.

## CAN AVIAN INFLUENZA SPREAD TO HUMANS?

Avian influenza viruses do not normally infect humans. Also, avian influenza viruses do not normally spread from person-to-person. However, occasional human infections with avian influenza viruses have occurred. Infection occurs most often through direct unprotected contact (no gloves, protective wear, facemasks or eye protection) with infected birds. People can become infected by breathing virus in droplets in the air or dust, or by touching an infected bird or surfaces contaminated with infected bird mucous, saliva or faeces and then touching their eyes, mouth or nose.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF AVIAN INFLUENZA IN HUMANS?

Signs and symptoms of avian influenza infections have ranged from no symptoms or mild influenza-like illness, to severe pneumonia requiring hospitalisation, and in rare cases death. Symptoms may include **fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, body aches, headaches, fatigue, red eyes (conjunctivitis) and shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.**

## WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF BEING INFECTED WITH AVIAN INFLUENZA?

People who have close contact with birds, especially poultry, or contaminated environments are most at risk of infection, such as veterinarians and farm workers.

## HOW DO YOU PREVENT GETTING INFECTED WITH AVIAN INFLUENZA?

The best way to prevent avian influenza is to avoid sources of exposure whenever possible:

- Avoid direct contact with wild birds as they can be infected with avian influenza viruses even if they don't look sick
- Avoid unprotected contact with birds and poultry that look sick or have died
- Do not touch surfaces that may be contaminated with saliva, mucous or faeces from wild or domestic birds. Recommended personal protective equipment (PPE) must be worn when in direct contact with birds that are potentially infected. Guidance for poultry workers on the right type of PPE and how to wear it can be found on the [CDC website](#).

If you find a sick or dead bird, do not touch it with your bare hands, use gloves or a plastic bag to handle the bird. Wash hands with soap and water afterwards.

## WHY IS AVIAN INFLUENZA IN HUMANS A PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERN?

The spread of avian influenza viruses from one infected person to a close contact is very rare, and when it has happened, it has only spread to a few people. However, because of the possibility that avian influenza viruses could change and gain the ability to spread easily between people, potentially leading to an influenza pandemic, monitoring for human infection and person-to-person spread is extremely important for public health.

## **IS THERE A VACCINE AGAINST AVIAN INFLUENZA IN HUMANS?**

There is currently no human vaccine against avian influenza. It is however recommended that poultry workers receive the annual seasonal influenza vaccine to reduce the risk of transmitting seasonal influenza to the poultry which could result in genetic reassortment of the two different viruses and lead to a new influenza A virus.

## **WHAT DO YOU DO IF YOU HAVE HAD CONTACT WITH POTENTIALLY INFECTED BIRDS?**

If you have had contact with potentially infected birds (sick or dead birds and poultry) and become sick within 10 days of the exposure, you should see a doctor or visit a clinic. Avoid close contact with other people as much as possible.

When you seek medical care, please inform the healthcare professional that you have had contact with sick or dead birds and ask them to alert the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) on the clinician hotline (0800 212 552). Further information for clinicians is available on the [NICD website](#).

Avian influenza cannot be diagnosed by symptoms alone, and is diagnosed by collecting a nose or throat swab for laboratory testing. NICD can provide this testing for free if requested by clinical, veterinary or public health staff.

## HOW CAN AVIAN INFLUENZA INFECTION IN HUMANS BE PREVENTED?

- Surveillance for avian influenza amongst animal populations, and occupationally exposed humans should be ongoing.
- All suspected cases of potential transmission of avian influenza virus from infected birds to humans should be investigated.
- Clusters (e.g., 3 or more cases in 72 hours, or 5 or more cases in a 5-day period) of severe respiratory illness (hospitalised or ICU admission or death) with evidence of common exposure or epidemiologic link (attention should be given to recent travel or exposure to animals implicated in zoonotic transmission of respiratory pathogens) are notifiable in South Africa and should be investigated. (Category 1 NMC: Respiratory disease caused by a novel respiratory pathogen).

### INFORMATION SOURCES

- <https://www.cdc.gov/influenza/avianinfluenza/index.htm>
- <https://www.who.int/health-topics/influenza-avian-and-other-zoonotic>
- <https://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/avian-influenza>
- Category 1 NMC: Respiratory disease caused by a novel respiratory pathogen



For more information visit:  
<https://www.nicd.ac.za/diseases-a-z-index/avian-influenza/x>

### FOLLOW US

