

Avian (Bird) Influenza: Fact Sheet # 4

Frequently Asked Questions

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza is a contagious viral infection that can affect all species of birds, and less commonly, infect mammals such as pigs and humans. The first documented infection of humans with a new variant of the avian influenza type A (H5N1) virus occurred in 1997 in Hong Kong. In that outbreak, 18 people were hospitalized and 6 of them died.

Has Avian Influenza been detected in wild birds within the NWT?

No H5N1 avian influenza has been detected in wild birds within the NWT.

Can people get Avian Influenza?

Avian influenza does not typically infect people. However, some subtypes of the type A virus, such as H5N1, H7N7, H7N3 and H9N2 have caused illness in people. Specific variants of H5N1 have been associated with causing the most serious illness in people.

What are the symptoms of avian influenza?

The symptoms of avian influenza can range from typical flu-like illness (fever, sore throat, cough and body aches), to pneumonia, difficulty breathing and other serious complications that can result in death.

What should hunters/others out on the land do to reduce risk of contracting Avian Influenza?

Hunters should use the following routine precautions when handling wild birds and animals:

- Do not handle or eat sick game.
- Wear rubber or disposable latex gloves while handling and cleaning game;
- thoroughly wash hands and all knives, equipment and surfaces that come in contact with game;
- do not eat, drink, or smoke while handling birds and animals; and
- ensure that all game are thoroughly cooked.

Can I get avian influenza from eating birds or eggs that have been infected?

To date, there has been no evidence suggesting people eating contaminated food can get avian influenza. In keeping with good public health practice, people should always fully cook the meat. In addition, if you are travelling to Asia or Europe, it is recommended that you do not eat raw or lightly cooked (i.e. runny) eggs.

If I travel to a place where Avian Influenza has been reported and I was in contact with poultry or wild fowl, am I likely to get sick?

The chance of getting avian influenza is small. However you should get a regular flu shot from your public health unit/health centre before you leave the country. You should also avoid unnecessary contact with live birds, both wild and domesticated. This means avoiding poultry farms and markets where live animals such as chickens and ducks are sold.

In addition, you should visit the Public Health Agency of Canada's travel health advisory page, www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/tmp-pmv/pub_e.html to see where avian influenza type A (H5N1) outbreaks have been reported.

What is being done to monitor the spread of Avian Influenza in NWT birds?

The GNWT supports the national survey of Influenza A viruses in wild birds coordinated by the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre. This surveillance program will build health management capacity in Canada through collaboration among public health, agriculture and wildlife agencies within federal and provincial/territorial governments, and with universities. The Canadian Wildlife Service (Environment Canada) is taking the lead in the surveillance program and obtaining samples from wild ducks, trapped for banding and other purposes as part of its on-going waterfowl management programs. This program tests all migratory bird flyways in Canada, including those that come into the NWT. In addition, the GNWT submits any found dead birds for testing. More information on Canada's Inter-agency Wild Bird Influenza Survey 2005 can be found at: http://wildlife1.usask.ca/ccwhc2003/current_news.php

What should I do if I find a dead bird?

Contact your local Renewable Resources officer or Environment and Natural Resources office as officers have the training to handle and transport dead birds safely. Do not attempt to move the carcass yourself.

For further information:

Contact the Office of The Chief Medical Health Officer at (867) 920-8877.

Visit the following websites:

www.hlthss.gov.nt.ca – NWT Department of Health and Social Services (See Programs & Services Section)

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/influenza/avian_e.html – Public Health Agency of Canada