



Fact Sheet

Highly Pathogenic H5N1 Avian Influenza and Pets

Can highly pathogenic H5N1 infect pets?

The highly pathogenic Asian Strain of H5N1 avian influenza currently found in Asia, Africa and Europe can infect multiple species of domestic (chickens, turkeys, quails, guinea fowl, etc.), wild and pet birds. This virus has also been detected in mammalian species including humans, rats and mice, weasels and ferrets, pigs, cats and dogs.

However, the number of documented cases of avian influenza H5N1 in non-avian species is very low despite the fact that this virus has caused large avian outbreaks globally, over the last few years.

How is it transmitted?

It is believed that the vast majority of human cases of AI H5N1 are the result of direct and close contact with infected birds. There have been no documented or reported cases of AI H5N1 being transmitted to humans from mammalian pets.

To date, the only feral cats shown conclusively to be naturally infected with AI H5N1 were found in an area of Germany which experienced a significant outbreak in wild birds in February, 2006. It is suspected that these cats became infected after eating infected wild birds. There have been additional reports of increased mortality in cats during AI H5N1 outbreaks in other countries but these have not been substantiated by laboratory tests. Some non-domestic cats (tigers and leopards) have also contracted the disease in zoos after eating raw infected poultry meat.

Serological studies in several Asian countries suggest that dogs have been exposed to the virus. An unpublished study carried out in 2005 by the National Institute of Animal Health in Bangkok showed that 160 out of 629 village dogs (25 %) had antibodies to AI H5N1. No clinical cases of AI H5N1 have been reported in dogs.

Can infected animals, such as cats, transmit the virus to humans?

The World Organization for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations confirm the statement issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) in February 2006 that "there is no present evidence that domestic cats can play a role in the transmission cycle of H5N1 viruses".

Current science suggests that the risk of a human being contracting avian influenza from a mammalian pet is very low, nonetheless, owners are encouraged to take appropriate precautions to protect their pets and themselves. Pet owners should contact their veterinarian if they have any concerns about the health of their pet.

Should pet owners take special precautions?

In view of the susceptibility of certain types of cats, it is recommended that cats in infected zones and surveillance zones set up around avian influenza outbreaks be kept indoors. Dogs in these areas should be kept on a lead as a precautionary measure.

Pet birds, if they are not normally kept indoors, should also be restricted to the indoors in areas which are experiencing AI H5N1 outbreaks in domestic or wild birds.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations provides the following advice to cat owners in areas where highly pathogenic H5N1 has been diagnosed or suspected in poultry or wild birds to take the following steps:

- be especially vigilant for any dead or sick cats and report such findings to the local veterinarian;
- do not touch or handle any sick looking or dead cat (or other animal) and report to the authorities;
- wash hands with water and soap regularly and especially after handling animals and cleaning their litter boxes or coming in contact with feces or saliva;
- make sure contact between cats and wild birds or poultry (or the feces) is avoided, and/or keep cats inside;
- if cats bring a sick or dead bird inside the house, put on plastic gloves and dispose of the bird in plastic bags for collection by local veterinary animal handlers;
- keep stray cats outside the house and avoid contact with them;
- if cats show breathing problems or nasal discharge, a veterinarian should be consulted.

It must be stressed that pets should not be abandoned under any circumstances. In some countries there has been public fear and uncertainty about the health of pets, mostly cats, and their role in spreading AI H5N1. Pets have been given up and abandoned as a result of these concerns. This seriously compromises the welfare of the animal through starvation and exposure to accidental injury and disease.

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