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Fact Sheet on Avian Influenza

What First Nations People and Inuit Need to Know About Avian Influenza or 'Bird Flu'

Most of us have heard about the flu (or influenza), but what is avian influenza or bird flu? This Fact Sheet will help you understand what the bird flu is, and what precautions you should take to reduce your risk.

What is the flu?

Human influenza, or the flu, is an infection of the lungs caused by the influenza virus. Various strains of the virus circulate throughout the world year-round, causing local outbreaks.

How is the flu spread?

The influenza virus spreads through droplets that have been coughed or sneezed into the air by someone who has the flu. You can get the flu by breathing in these droplets through your nose or mouth, or by the droplets landing directly on your eyes. The flu virus is also found on the hands of people with the flu and on surfaces they have touched. You can become infected if you shake hands with infected persons or if you touch things that they have touched and then touch your own eyes, nose or mouth.

What is "bird flu" or avian influenza?

Avian influenza is a virus that can affect all species of birds but can, less commonly, infect mammals including people. Wild birds are not generally affected by bird flu but can still spread it to domestic birds such as chickens, geese and turkeys.

Why are some domestic birds and people getting sick?

Right now there is a strain of bird flu called H5N1 circulating throughout Southeast Asia and parts of Europe. This particular strain of flu will kill most domestic birds it infects, including chickens, ducks and geese. Avian influenza viruses such as the H5N1 virus can, on rare occasions, infect people. To date, most human cases have been linked to direct contact with infected poultry and their droppings. This contact often includes exposure to the virus during the slaughter, de-feathering and preparation of poultry for cooking.

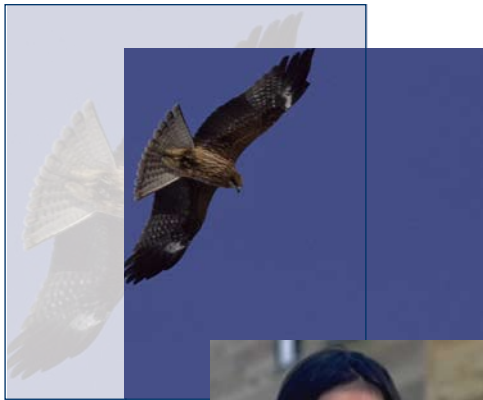
Should I avoid eating domestic poultry or eggs?

There is no evidence to suggest that people can become infected with bird flu by eating cooked eggs or birds like chickens, ducks and geese. It is important that meat, poultry and eggs are always well cooked. You should wash your hands (or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer) when cooking. You should keep meat, eggs and poultry away from other food when they are stored in your fridge and when you are cooking with them.



Avian Influenza





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Do First Nations people and Inuit need to be concerned?

Although the risk of catching bird flu is very low, hunters and people who prepare and cook traditional foods, including wild birds, should take the following precautions to help reduce any risk:

- do not handle or eat sick birds or birds that have died from unknown causes;
- avoid touching the blood, secretions or droppings of wild birds;
- do not rub your eyes, touch your face, eat, drink or smoke when cleaning wild game birds;
- keep young children away when cleaning game birds and discourage them from playing in areas that could be contaminated with wild bird droppings;
- when preparing game, wash knives, tools, work surfaces and other equipment with soap and warm water followed by a household bleach solution (0.5% sodium hypochlorite);
- wear water-proof household gloves or disposable latex/plastic gloves when handling or cleaning game;
- wash gloves and hands (for at least 20 seconds) with soap and warm water immediately after you have finished preparing game or cleaning equipment. If there is no water available, remove any dirt using a moist towlette, apply an alcohol based hand gel (between 60–90% alcohol) and wash your hands with soap and warm water as soon as it is possible;
- if clothing and shoes become soiled when handling a bird, keep them in a sealed plastic bag until they can be washed;
- thoroughly cook poultry/game meat by ensuring that inside temperature reaches 85°C for whole birds or 74°C for bird parts (i.e. no visible pink meat, and juice runs clear); and
- never keep wild birds in your home or as pets.

If you become sick while handling birds or shortly afterwards, see your doctor. Tell your doctor that you have been in contact with wild birds.

In addition, if you often hunt or handle wild birds, you should consider getting an annual vaccination against seasonal human influenza. This vaccination will not protect you against bird flu, but it will reduce the likelihood that you will become infected with both human and bird flu strains at the same time. This will limit the chance of the flu viruses mixing to create a new strain of flu virus to which people have little or no immunity.

It is considered safe to hunt, handle and eat healthy wild birds, if these precautions are taken.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your local health authority (for example, an Environmental Health Officer, community health centre or nursing station near you) or visit the Public Health Agency of Canada's Web site www.pandemicinfluenza.gc.ca for more information about influenza.