

## Bird Flu - What Bird Keepers Should Know and Do

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### INTRODUCTION

Avian influenza is a highly contagious and pathogenic viral disease of birds. The highly pathogenic form has not occurred in Australia. Outbreaks have been reported from a number of countries worldwide since 2003. They have had disastrous economic effects on poultry farmers and have caused a number of deaths in humans. The highly pathogenic avian influenza primarily affects people who come in close contact with infected birds. Human-to-human transfer of the virus has been rarely reported.

### BIRD SPECIES AFFECTED

All commercial and domesticated poultry and many wild species, including ducks, turkeys, pheasants, partridges, quail, geese, guinea fowl and ostriches can be infected.

Avian influenza can be brought into Australia by migratory wild birds, such as waterfowl and sea birds. Many species of wild birds carry the virus but generally show no signs of disease. However, if they or their excretions come into contact with domestic birds, outbreaks of severe disease can occur. It is therefore essential to prevent contact between wild birds, especially waterfowl, and domestic poultry.

### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Clinical signs include respiratory distress, a sudden drop in egg production, loss of appetite, purple discolouration of wattles, combs and legs, coughing, diarrhoea and sudden death.

### WHO TO REPORT TO

Bird keepers should regularly check their birds and report any unusual signs of disease to their local veterinarian, stock inspector, or contact Australia's Animal Disease hotline on 1800 675 888.



**Spot the Risk**

- #1 Stock Purchase**  
Insist on a health declaration and monitor new stock for a week.
- #2 Vehicles & Visitors**  
Limit vehicle access and clean visitors' boots and hands.
- #3 Feed**  
Beware of contaminated feed. Only purchase from quality-assured manufacturers.
- #4 Property**  
Ensure houses, farms and production areas are secure and checked regularly.
- #5 Work with your Vet**  
Isolate sick birds and keep a record. Report unusual or abnormal behaviour.
- #6 Pests**  
Implement measures to protect your flock from harmful pests.
- #7 Good Animal Health Practices**  
Develop a health and welfare plan.
- #8 Dispose of Dead Birds**  
Dispose of manure and dead birds in an approved manner.

If you notice unusual disease symptoms, abnormal behaviour or unexpected deaths in your flock, immediately call your veterinarian, stock inspector, or the Emergency Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888.

**AnimalHealth AUSTRALIA**  
Australian Animal Health Council Ltd

**Look. Check. Ask a Vet. 1800 675 888**

## WHAT CAN POULTRY AND BIRD KEEPERS DO TO PREVENT THE DISEASE?

Restrict access to areas where birds are kept. Inspect and clean bird areas at least weekly. Remove sand and grit from the aviary between batches of birds, and every few months for resident birds. Thoroughly clean and disinfect floors and walls regularly. Clean and disinfect water and feed containers weekly. Prevent domestic birds from coming into contact with wild birds by restricting access to open ponds, lakes and creeks. Use protective netting to prevent wild birds from entering domestic bird areas. Ensure that water is from a chlorinated mains supply or a high quality bore; otherwise, if such sources are not available, treat the water with chlorine.

## ADVICE ON HANDLING OF SICK AND DEAD BIRDS

Avoid unnecessary contact. If unusual signs of disease or death in birds are seen, the first action should be to report the situation to one of the following;

- Your local veterinarian.
  
- The NTG veterinarian or a livestock biosecurity officer on:
  - Darwin **08 8999 2033**
  - Katherine **08 8973 9739**
  - Tennant Creek **08 8962 4488**
  - Alice Springs **08 8951 8111**
  
- The Emergency Animal Disease hotline **1800 675 888**

Since many bird diseases appear similar and there is also a large variability in the symptoms that some diseases show, laboratory tests are generally needed to confirm the cause.

Individual sick aviary birds should be separated from healthy birds. A single-bird case is probably not an emergency animal disease, but it could be a zoonotic disease (one that humans can catch), such as ornithosis (psittacosis). Contact your veterinarian for advice.

Dead aviary birds need to be removed from cages and disposed of if not required for diagnostic purposes. Removal of dead birds can be done using impervious gloves, a plastic bag or an implement, such as a shovel or tongs.

Submission of samples to a laboratory must be done by a veterinarian or stock inspector. If it is not possible to arrange this, place the dead bird in a double wrap of plastic and keep it chilled. Prior notification and approval is required before sending in samples.

Sick and dead wild birds should be left alone except when there a danger of companion animals and children coming in contact with them. In such cases, dispose dead birds proficiently.

Disposal should be by deep burial, composting, burning or by wrapping in several layers of paper, sealing and placing in domestic garbage.

Minimum precautions for handling sick and dead birds include:

- Gloves – dispose or disinfect after use.
- Eye protection – glasses or visor.
- Protective clothing including footwear – dispose or disinfect after use.
- Fly control – insect repellent to prevent fly contact with your eyes.
- Respiratory protection – dust mask is desirable.

Decontamination is achieved by:

- Washing hands using soap or detergent.
- Washing clothing and equipment using soap or detergent. Hypochlorite products, such as – among many others - Virkon® and alkali (washing soda) are also suitable.
- Cleaning/scrubbing to remove contaminated material. Care is required with proper cleaning of footwear as many infectious organisms are carried in bird faeces and can survive for long periods.

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