

Avian Influenza (Bird Flu)

Workplace human infections with Avian Influenza viruses do occur and everyone with exposure to potentially infected animals needs to be aware of the exposure risks for contracting avian flu as well as worker protection options.

Avian influenza is divided into two groups based upon the severity of the disease they produce: low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) viruses and highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) viruses such as H5N1. LPAI generally cause minor illness, while HPAI viruses are highly contagious and cause high mortality in poultry. While there is currently no evidence of person to person spread, workers can be infected after unprotected exposure to animals infected with H5N1.

This document provides information on:

- Background
- Symptoms
- How people become infected
- Employees at potential risk for exposure
- Recommendations for Employees at Risk of Exposure
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Employees in Direct Contact with Potentially Infected Animals
- What To Do if You Believe That You Have Been Exposed to Avian Influenza

Background

H5N1 was first seen in the U.S. in wild, migratory birds in 2015, and in agricultural poultry stock beginning in 2022. To date H5N1 viruses have been found in U.S. commercial poultry, backyard poultry, and hobbyist bird flocks across multiple U.S. states. Since then, millions of birds have been culled because of bird flu infection in the United States.

H5N1 infections in mammals have since been reported across the U.S., Canada, and other parts of the world. Most affected mammals (red foxes, bears, skunks, raccoons, opossums, seals, cats, mice, and others) prey on or scavenge birds for food. The 2024 infections among dairy herds were the first reported instances of H5N1 causing disease in cattle.

Although avian influenza viruses have the potential to develop into pandemic viruses if they acquire the ability to pass readily from person-to-person, to date there is no evidence of sustained (ongoing) spread among people. For the most up-to-date information on avian influenza, consult the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Avian Flu information page: www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu.

Symptoms of Avian Flu in Humans

Symptoms in humans can range from asymptomatic or mild illness (e.g., conjunctivitis (eye redness), mild flu-like upper respiratory symptoms) to severe illness (e.g., pneumonia) requiring hospitalization. Signs and symptoms may include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, fatigue, and shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. Less common symptoms include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, or seizures. Fever does not always occur in humans infected with avian influenza.

How People Become Infected

Avian influenza infections in humans are the result of contact with infected poultry (e.g., domesticated chickens, ducks, and turkeys) or dairy cattle, including when a person touches a contaminated surface, object, or material and then touches the mouth, nose, or eyes, as well as inhalation of avian influenza virus.



Poultry eradication workers wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
Photo: iStock

Employees at Potential Risk of Exposure

- Workers handling or contacting sick birds, livestock, or other animals
 - Poultry workers, including workers involved in eradication activities (e.g., depopulating poultry and disposal)
 - Dairy operation workers including working with raw milk, udders, and viscera from lactating cows
 - Slaughterhouse workers performing certain tasks on lactating dairy cattle
 - Animal handlers other than agriculture (e.g., animal control, zookeepers, veterinarians)

- Laboratory employees who handle influenza viruses
- Healthcare workers treating patients with known or suspected avian influenza viruses

Recommendations for Employees at Risk of Exposure

- Avoid unprotected contact with birds and animals suspected or known to be infected, including the following associated with infected birds: poultry carcasses, poultry feces or litter, and surfaces and water that might be contaminated with poultry excretions.
- Use proper hand hygiene practices. Clean your hands often and thoroughly, using soap and water for 15-20 seconds (or a water-less, alcohol-based hand rub when soap is not available).
 - Avoid contacting or contaminating eyes, nose, and mouth (e.g., adjusting glasses, rubbing the nose, or touching face/eyes with gloves that have been in contact with suspected or confirmed animals, raw milk, or contaminated/potentially contaminated surfaces).
- Get the seasonal flu vaccine. While it cannot protect against avian flu, it can help prevent being infected with both seasonal and avian flu at the same time.
- If you are sick, stay at home except to get medical attention.
- Contact your state or local health department for additional guidance, especially if you begin having symptoms after potential exposure.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Employees in Direct Contact with Potentially Infected Birds:

- Protective clothing
 - Long-sleeved fluid-resistant coveralls that can be cleaned and disinfected or disposed of
 - Properly fitted, unvented or indirectly vented safety goggles or a face shield
 - Impermeable (fluid-resistant) gloves
 - Rubber boots or rubber boot covers with sealed seams
 - Head or hair cover
- A NIOSH Approved® filtering facepiece respirator (FFR) (e.g., N95® or greater) or elastomeric half mask respirator with a minimum of N95® filters
- 29 CFR 1910.134 or general industry requires, in addition to the provision and use of appropriate respiratory protection, a written respiratory protection program, medical evaluations, fit testing, and training

Workers should put on and take off PPE in a separate clean area. Workers must receive training on PPE as outlined in 29 CFR 1910 Subpart I (Personal Protective Equipment).

For additional information about PPE selection and reducing risk for workers, see CDC recommendations for [Reducing Risk for People Working with or Exposed to Animals](#). In addition, CDC provides guidance showing the appropriate [sequence for putting on \(donning\) and taking off \(doffing\) PPE](#) to avoid self-contamination, including rubbing.

Heat and PPE

Some PPE (e.g., certain types of respirators, impermeable clothing, and head coverings) can increase the risk of heat-related illness. OSHA encourages employers to modify work practices when high heat conditions make it difficult for workers to perform their job safely, or where heat discourages workers from using PPE or using it properly. Some worksites are not cooled with engineering controls. At those locations, OSHA encourages [employers to modify work practices](#), including providing frequent rest breaks or rotation of staff in high heat areas, when heat impacts safe work practices or when heat increases risk of injury or illness.

If You Believe That You Have Been Exposed to Avian Influenza:

- Tell your employer
- Monitor your health for 10 days
- Consult a health care provider and your state or local public health department about what steps to take if you become ill with fever or develop a cough or difficulty breathing
- Do not travel while sick, and limit contact with others as much as possible to help prevent the spread

Training

Workers with potential for exposure should receive training on proper PPE, hazards associated with exposure to avian influenza, and procedures in place in their facility to isolate and report cases to reduce exposures.

Additional Information

More information on avian influenza can be found on [OSHA's Avian flu webpage](#).

Workers' Rights

Workers have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose a risk of serious harm.
- Receive information and training (in a language and vocabulary the worker understands) about workplace hazards, methods to prevent them, and the OSHA standards that apply to their workplace.
- Review records of work-related injuries and illnesses.
- File a complaint asking OSHA to inspect their workplace if they believe there is a serious hazard or that their employer is not following OSHA's rules. OSHA will keep all identities confidential.
- Exercise their rights under the law without retaliation, including reporting an injury or raising health and safety concerns with their employer or OSHA. If a worker has been retaliated against for using their rights, they must file a complaint with OSHA as soon as possible, but no later than 30 days.

For additional information, see OSHA's Workers page (www.osha.gov/workers).

How to Contact OSHA

OSHA's mission is to assure America's workers have safe and healthful working conditions free from unlawful retaliation. OSHA carries out its mission by setting and enforcing standards; enforcing anti-retaliation provisions of the OSH Act and other federal whistleblower laws; providing and supporting training, outreach, education, and assistance; and ensuring state OSHA programs are at least as effective as federal OSHA, furthering a national system of worker safety and health protections. For more information, visit www.osha.gov or call OSHA at 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), TTY 1-877-889-5627.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999; teletypewriter (TTY) number: (877) 889-5627.

