

Food Safety: Eating properly handled and cooked poultry is safe. LPAI is not transmissible by eating poultry. If HPAI were detected in the U.S., the chance of infected poultry entering the food chain would be extremely low.

Cooking poultry to the proper temperature and preventing cross contamination between raw and cooked food is the key to food safety. Consumers are reminded to:

- Wash hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds before and after handling food;
- Prevent cross-contamination by keeping raw meat, poultry, fish and their juices away from other foods;
- After cutting raw meats, wash cutting board, knife and counter tops with hot, soapy water;
- Sanitize cutting boards by using a solution of 1 teaspoon chlorine bleach in 1 quart of water; and
- Use a food thermometer to ensure food has reached the proper temperature. Cook whole birds to 180 °F; breasts to 170 °F; drumsticks, thighs and wings to 180 °F; ground turkey and chicken to 165 °F; and a minimum oven temperature of 325 °F.

More Information

USDA efforts to protect against and respond to bird flu: www.usda.gov/birdflu

Safe food preparation: USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline—1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854), TTY: 1-800-256-7072 (available in English and Spanish). Online answers are provided at www.fsis.usda.gov by clicking on “Ask Karen.”

U.S. government efforts to protect human health: www.pandemicflu.gov.



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Avian Influenza

USDA Efforts and Response



What is the Bird Flu?

Avian influenza (AI)—the bird flu—is a disease caused by a virus that infects domestic poultry, wild birds (like quail, cranes, geese and ducks) and pet birds like parrots. Each year, there is a bird flu season just as there is for humans and, as with people, some forms of the flu are worse than others.

AI viruses are classified by a combination of two groups of proteins: H proteins, of which there are 16 (H1-H16), and N proteins, of which there are 9 (N1-N9). AI strains also are divided into two groups: low pathogenicity (LP) and high pathogenicity (HP).

LP AI, or “low path” avian influenza, has existed in the United States since the early 1900’s and is not uncommon here. It causes birds to become ill and can be fatal to some of them. These strains of the disease pose no serious threat to human health.

HP AI, or “high path” avian influenza, is often fatal in birds and is more easily transmitted. H5N1 HP AI is the type currently detected in parts of Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. This strain has been transmitted to people in Southeast Asia, most of whom had extensive, direct contact with infected birds.

Bird Flu in the U.S.

LP AI is not uncommon among poultry in the U.S. LP AI does not pose a significant threat to human health.

HP AI has been detected three times in the United States: in 1924, 1983 and 2004. No significant human illness resulted from these outbreaks.

The 1924 H7 HP AI outbreak was contained and eradicated in East Coast live bird markets.

The 1983-84 H5N2 HP AI outbreak resulted in the destruction of approximately 17 million chickens, turkeys and guinea fowl in the northeastern U.S. to contain and eradicate the disease.

In 2004, USDA confirmed an H5N2 HP AI outbreak in chickens in the southern United States. The disease was quickly eradicated thanks to close coordination and cooperation between USDA, state, local and industry leaders. Because of the quick response, which included quarantine and culling of birds, the disease was limited to one flock.

HP AI can be spread from birds to people as a result of extensive direct contact with infected birds. Broad concerns about public health relate to the potential for the virus to mutate, or change into a form that could spread from person to person. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is aggressively working with a team of federal, state and industry partners to ensure public health is protected.

Protecting the U.S.

Import restrictions: As a primary safeguard, USDA maintains trade restrictions on the importation of poultry and poultry products from all affected countries. No birds can be imported from a country found to have the H5N1 strain of HP AI.

All imported live birds must be quarantined for 30 days at a USDA facility and tested for avian influenza before entering the U.S. This requirement also covers returning U.S.-origin pet birds.

International Assistance: USDA is working closely with international organizations like the World Organization for Animal Health, the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization to assist HP AI-affected countries and other countries with disease prevention, management and eradication activities. By helping these countries prepare for, manage and eradicate HP AI outbreaks, USDA can reduce the risk of the disease spreading into the United States from overseas.

Surveillance: USDA works with federal, state and industry partners to monitor U.S. bird populations. Surveillance is conducted in four key areas: live bird markets, commercial flocks, backyard flocks and migratory bird populations.

Random testing occurs in live bird markets and commercial flocks. Additionally, birds that show signs of illness are tested.

To help backyard and smaller poultry producers, the USDA “Biosecurity for the Birds” program provides important information about reducing the chances of birds becoming infected with AI. Biosecurity refers to the application of practical, common sense management practices to keep AI and other poultry diseases out of our commercial and backyard flocks.

USDA also has tested thousands of wild migratory birds, and this testing is being expanded.

Response: USDA provides funding and support personnel to states when LP AI is detected. Close attention is paid to H5 and H7 LP AI strains, because of their potential to mutate into HP AI. When HP AI is detected, APHIS personnel are primary responders because of the disease infectivity and high mortality rate among poultry.

In the event of a HP AI outbreak in the United States, USDA maintains a bank of avian influenza vaccine for birds that would be available, if needed.

USDA works closely with its federal, state and tribal partners, as well as industry stakeholders to ensure that effective and coordinated emergency response plans are ready should an outbreak of HP AI occur in the United States.

Research: USDA researchers are developing faster diagnostic tests, enhanced vaccines for birds and new information about how avian influenza spreads so that the United States is better prepared for AI outbreaks.