QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

AVIAN INFLUENZA (BIRD FLU)

FACT SHEET



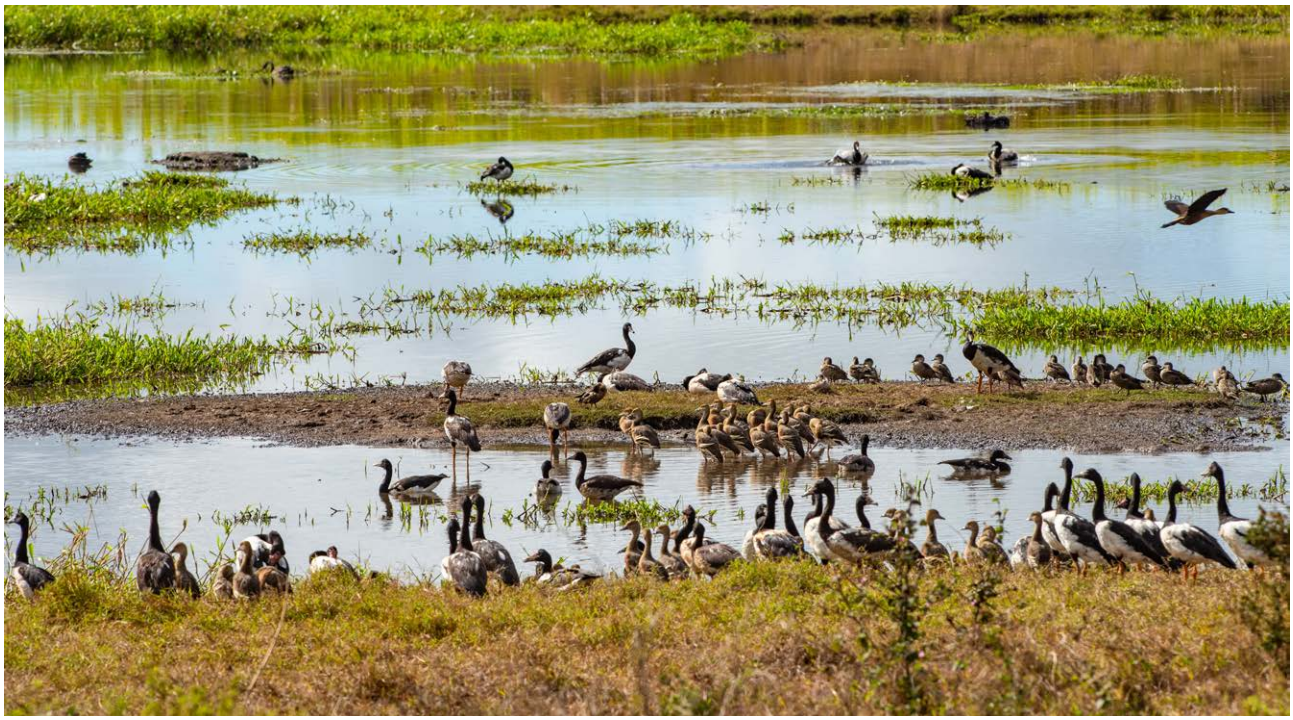
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Queensland Government

WHAT IS AVIAN INFLUENZA?

Avian influenza (bird flu) is a zoonotic disease caused by strains of the influenza A virus that primarily infect birds, both domestic and wild, but can also infect other animals and humans. The current dominant strain worldwide is H5N1.

Several avian influenza strains have been detected in Australian birds, but human cases are extremely rare.



Natural hosts

The main natural reservoir hosts of avian influenza are:

- Anseriformes (waterfowl: ducks, swans, geese)
- Charadriiformes (gulls, terns and shorebirds).

In the right conditions, avian influenza virus can survive in the environment for months.

How is it spread?

Avian influenza is spread in bird populations through direct contact with infected:

- body fluids (faecal–oral transmission via faeces and saliva)
- respiratory droplets or other secretions
- feathers.

Although avian influenza is primarily a bird disease, it has infected more than 60 mammalian species.

Birds may indirectly contract the virus from feed, water or soil sources that have been contaminated with infected bird excretions. Wild birds can carry and spread the virus, some without showing signs of disease.

Domestic poultry, especially chickens, are at greater risk of avian influenza than other birds. The virus can spread between poultry indirectly via contaminated equipment, such as feeding or bedding gear, which may transfer body fluids from one bird to another. Affected wild mammals are generally species like foxes and bears that predate or scavenge on infected birds, or marine mammals living in close proximity to infected birds.

Australia has strict biosecurity measures that greatly reduce the risk of avian influenza spreading.

Direct transmission to humans can occur through:

- handling or processing infected wild or domestic birds, primarily infected poultry (chickens, ducks, turkeys or geese)
- high-level exposure to body fluids or respiratory droplets of infected birds
- close contact with sick or dead birds.

Indirect transmission to humans can occur through:

- contact with objects (e.g. cages, equipment, bedding, vehicles, clothing) contaminated with infected bird faeces or other body fluids
- inhalation of infected dust or aerosols in poultry sheds.

You cannot catch this disease by eating cooked poultry meat or eggs – the heat kills the virus.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who comes into contact with an infected bird is at risk. People who are more likely to be at risk include:

- vets and vet nurses, poultry farm workers, animal transporters, wildlife carers and volunteers, rangers, animal refuge workers and wildlife scientists who work with birds
- people handling sick or dead birds, especially within contaminated poultry facilities.

Backyard chickens pose very low risk if they appear healthy and biosecurity precautions are followed, such as regular cleaning of drink, feed and storage areas and any clothing and boots worn around chickens.

What are the symptoms?

In animals

Symptoms in birds include:

- respiratory distress (panting or sneezing)
- inability to stand, walk or fly properly
- swollen head or limbs
- a droopy or puffed-up appearance
- an unusual head or neck posture
- a sudden drop in egg production
- lethargy
- not eating or drinking
- sudden death.

Depending on the virus strain, death may suddenly occur in large numbers in bird populations.

Symptoms in mammals (e.g. seals, cows, cats) include:

- weakness or tiredness
- trouble walking or breathing
- seizures
- tremors
- walking in circles
- drooling
- runny nose
- sudden illness or death.



In humans

Infection may produce no symptoms (asymptomatic infection) or typical flu symptoms. People infected with avian influenza are considered to be infectious from one day before symptoms start until 7 days after symptoms begin (for mild cases) or 7 days after acute symptoms are gone (for more severe infections that may lead to pneumonia).

Symptoms may include:

- fever
- cough
- sore throat
- conjunctivitis
- shortness of breath
- muscle aches and pains
- headache
- fatigue
- pneumonia.

Human infection in Australia is extremely rare. Human-to-human transmission is even more rare and has not occurred in Australia.

How can I prevent infection?

Avian influenza vaccines exist for birds and are used for high-risk or endangered species under biosecurity direction. Human avian influenza vaccines exist for specific strains, including for H5N1, but are not widely available or routinely used in Australia. However, an annual flu vaccination is important and recommended for all people older than 6 months.

Although it does not protect against avian influenza, it protects you from getting sick with influenza

strains known to infect humans, and reduces the risk of seasonal and avian influenza viruses combining to create a more dangerous type of influenza virus. This is why the annual flu vaccination is especially important for poultry workers and other people at greater risk of avian influenza exposure.

Other steps you can take to avoid infection:

- Avoid handling sick or dead birds.
- Use personal protective equipment (PPE) when working with poultry.
- On farms, maintain strict biosecurity measures.
- Report sudden bird deaths to authorities.
- Cook poultry and eggs thoroughly so they are safe to consume.

⚠ Outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in Australia have occurred in poultry but not in wildlife.

What treatments are available?

There is no specific treatment for avian influenza and recovery in birds is unlikely once clinical signs develop. If detected in time, humans can be treated with antiviral medications.

If you think you may have been exposed to avian influenza, please contact your doctor or public health agency for further advice.

Cover: A vet monitors poultry health on a farm. Courtesy: Alamy/Elena Shishkina
Page 2: Ducks and magpie geese on coastal wetlands near Mackay. QM, Gary Cranitch
Page 3: Backyard chickens pose very low risk for avian influenza when enclosures are cleaned regularly. Courtesy: Alamy/Jeremy Kruse

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