



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

Avian Influenza

What poultry producers and bird keepers need to know

■ Disease and Cause

Avian influenza is a highly contagious viral infection of birds. Some avian influenza viruses, called 'highly pathogenic avian influenza' (HPAI) viruses, can cause sudden high mortality (up to 100%) in domestic fowl ('chickens') and turkeys.

■ Bird species affected

All commercial or domesticated poultry and many wild bird species are susceptible to infection with avian influenza, including chickens, turkeys, pheasants, partridges, quail, ducks, geese, guinea fowl and ostriches.

Avian influenza viruses can be brought into Australia by nomadic or migratory wild birds and then cycle through Australian wild or free-living waterfowl.

Many species of wild birds, especially waterfowl, carry the virus but generally show no signs of disease. However, if they or their excretions come into contact with domestic poultry (domestic fowl or 'chickens', turkeys, quail etc.) outbreaks of severe disease (HPAI or 'fowl plague') could occur.

Generally, humans are not affected, but the H5N1 strain of avian influenza virus can infect humans who come in very close contact with infected birds. People **do not** get infected with avian influenza through eating cooked chicken meat and eggs.

■ Distribution

Avian influenza viruses are probably present throughout the world in wild waterbirds, with outbreaks of disease occurring as sporadic events. It now appears that the H5N1 strain of avian influenza is likely to occur in several countries in South-East Asia.

Avian influenza viruses have caused clinical disease in commercial poultry in Australia in Victoria (1976, 1985 and 1992), Queensland (1994) and NSW (1997). In each of these instances, the disease was successfully eradicated.

■ Signs to look out for

The disease is difficult to diagnose and clinical signs are variable, depending on the strain of the virus and the age and species of the birds infected. Clinical signs include sudden death, respiratory distress, loss of appetite, purple discolouration of the wattles, combs and legs, coughing and diarrhoea. A consistent finding is a sudden drop in egg production. It is essential that poultry-producers and bird-keepers immediately report any unusual signs of disease in their birds.

Poultry producers and bird keepers should regularly check their birds and immediately report any unusual signs of disease to their local vet, stock inspector, agricultural agency or Australia's animal disease watch hotline on 1800 675 888.

■ What can poultry and bird keepers do?

Poultry producers and bird keepers should:

- restrict access to bird areas;
- ensure visitors are only permitted to enter bird areas or sheds after putting on protective clothing and using foot-baths containing appropriate disinfectants at bird entries;
- inspect birds daily and clean bird areas at least once a week;
- remove sand and grit from the aviary between batches of birds, and every few months for resident birds;
- thoroughly clean concrete floors, walls and aviary wire and scrub them down with detergent;
- clean and disinfect feed containers regularly;
- always source your birds from a reputable producer or breeder. Avoid buying birds from markets or shows, as mixing birds from different sources can spread disease rapidly.
- Do not share equipment with other bird-keepers, unless it has been thoroughly disinfected.
- prevent domestic birds from coming into contact with wild birds by restricting access to open ponds, lakes and creeks. Protective netting can also prevent wild birds from entering domestic bird areas.
- ensure water supplied to poultry is from a chlorinated mains water supply, a high quality bore water supply, or treated with chlorine if such sources are not available.
- Contact your local poultry extension officer, vet, or agricultural agency in your State or Territory or for further information on biosecurity.

■ More information

You can get more information on avian influenza online at www.outbreak.gov.au or, you can contact your local vet or the agricultural agency in your State or Territory.

■ Australia's control strategy

In the event of an outbreak of avian influenza in Australia, Australia's agreed strategy, as detailed in AUSVETPLAN Disease Strategy for HPAI, is to eradicate the disease by immediate stamping-out and disposal of infected and in-contact poultry to remove the major source of infection.

Additionally, there would be:

- strict quarantine and movement controls to prevent the spread of infection;
- decontamination to remove the virus;
- tracing and surveillance to locate the source of infection, locate other infected premises and determine the extent of the infection; and
- zoning to define infected and disease-free areas.

Vaccination may be an option in some circumstances, but no vaccine is currently approved for use in Australia.

More information on the AUSVETPLAN can be found on Animal Health Australia's website at www.animalhealthaustralia.com.au.

If avian influenza were to pose a significant threat (direct or indirect) to Australia's human population, the Australian Action Plan for Pandemic Influenza would be activated. This plan provides direction for actions by all Australian governments (Commonwealth and State/Territory), their agencies and emergency services in the event of such an occurrence.