

High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza and Wild Birds

Advice for people who encounter sick or dead wild birds

Version 3.1, December 2023

Summary

This advice has been prepared for individuals or groups who may encounter sick or dead wild birds.

High pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) is a type of bird flu, which is an infectious disease that causes severe illness and death in poultry and potentially in wild birds. HPAI can also cause disease in other animals, including rare cases in people.

Since 2021, a new strain of HPAI has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry and wild birds on all continents except Oceania (Australia and New Zealand) and mainland Antarctica. Mortalities have been observed in a wide range of bird species, seen as individual bird deaths and mass mortalities. Recent research has determined that the likelihood of this new strain entering Australia via migratory birds has increased compared to previous years¹, with August to November being the period of particular concern as this is when migratory birds return to Australia from the northern hemisphere.

While there are many other possible causes of wild bird illness and death, it is important that individuals and groups who encounter sick or dead wild birds are aware of HPAI, to ensure an appropriate investigation is undertaken and to ensure risks to themselves and other animals are minimised.

Any unusual illness or death in wild birds should be reported via the [Emergency Animal Disease Hotline](#) on 1800 675 888.² Further details of what to look for are included [below](#).

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza (also known as bird flu) is a viral disease caused by influenza A virus. As with other viruses, there are different and numerous strains. Strains of avian influenza are categorised as either low pathogenicity (LPAI) or high pathogenicity (HPAI) depending on the potential severity of disease caused in poultry. HPAI viruses are associated with severe disease and high number of deaths in poultry. The strain of HPAI currently causing the global outbreaks of disease is called H5N1. This strain of HPAI has not been detected in Australia.

Avian influenza viruses can be transmitted between birds or to other animals via direct contact with respiratory secretions and faecal material, predation or scavenging, and indirect exposure to contaminated environments or objects (e.g. clothing, boots, equipment, etc.).

For further details about avian influenza in wild birds see the [WHA fact sheet](#).

¹ M.Wille and M.Klaassen, unpublished data

² The **Emergency Animal Disease (EAD) Hotline** is a toll-free number that connects callers to the relevant state or territory officer. Anyone suspecting an EAD outbreak should use this number to get immediate advice and assistance.

Which species are affected?

- **Birds:**
 - It should be assumed that all bird species may be infected by HPAI virus.
 - **Wild birds (native and feral species):** a wide range of species can be infected with HPAI virus. It should be assumed that all bird species may be infected by HPAI virus.
 - **Domestic poultry and captive birds:** poultry (e.g. chickens, turkeys) are particularly susceptible to infection with HPAI virus.
- **Mammals:**
 - Occasional infections identified as HPAI have been reported in mammals.
 - **Wild mammals (native and feral species):** mammals, especially those that may consume or come into contact with birds (e.g. foxes) and marine mammals (e.g. seals), are known to be susceptible to HPAI. Infection of terrestrial (land) mammals is presumed to occur via consuming infected birds.
 - **Domestic mammals:** a range of mammalian production, pet and zoo species are known to be susceptible to HPAI (e.g. cats, pigs).

What to look out for

- Small groups or clusters (5 or more) of sick or dead wild birds of any species.
- Individual or <5 sick or dead wild birds:
 - seabirds, waterbirds, shorebirds or birds of prey (e.g. eagles, hawks)
 - any other bird species with signs of avian influenza infection as outlined below.

Infected live birds may show a wide range of signs that they are sick, including:

- lack of coordination, tremors, swimming in circles
- twisted necks or other unusual posture
- inability to stand or fly
- diarrhoea
- difficulty breathing, coughing or sneezing
- swelling around the head, neck and eyes
- cloudiness or change in colour of the eyes

Can people be infected?

- HPAI can infect people, although infections with the current strains are uncommon and have typically only occurred in people who have had close contact with infected birds. Infection can cause a wide range of symptoms from no symptoms at all, to severe illness and death (see [Australian Department of Health and Aged Care](#)).
- Avoid contact with sick or dead birds or other animals.
- Avoid contact with land or waterways in which sick or dead birds or other animals have been observed.
- Information for bird owners, including protecting yourself and your birds, is available at [Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry](#).
- It is safe to eat properly cooked eggs, meat and poultry products.

What to do

- **AVOID** contact with sick or dead birds and their environment. Do not allow pets to touch or eat sick or dead birds.
- **RECORD** what you see, the location the animal was found, and take photos or video.
- **REPORT any unusual sickness or mass mortality events in wild birds via the [Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888](#)**. Reporting will alert authorities to the event so they can evaluate the need for diagnostic testing or other investigation. Even if testing is not undertaken, all reports help inform our understanding of the disease and how to manage it.

Unusual signs of disease or mass deaths in wildlife

Please remember, if you see other unusual signs of disease or mass deaths in wildlife you can report it to:

- Your local [State/Territory WHA Coordinator](#)
- The 24-hour [Emergency Animal Disease Hotline](#) on 1800 675 888
- The Department of Primary Industries or Agriculture in the State/Territory in which the event has occurred.
- Your local veterinarian.

Resources

Wildlife Health Australia

- WHA Fact sheet on [avian influenza in wild birds in Australia](#)
- [High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza Information](#)
- [National Avian Influenza Wild Bird Surveillance](#)

Australian Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

- [Information on Avian Influenza or Bird Flu](#) and [Information for bird owners](#)
- [Outbreak.gov.au](#) provides details on how to prepare for and respond to animal pests and diseases.

Australian Biosecurity Manuals

- [National Wildlife Biosecurity Manual](#)
- [National Farm Biosecurity Manuals – Poultry](#) (e.g. chickens)
- [National Zoo Biosecurity Manual](#)
- Australian Veterinary Association (2017) [Guidelines for Veterinary Personal Biosecurity](#)

Human Health

- Australian Department of Health and Aged Care information on [Avian influenza in humans](#)

International resources

World Organisation for Animal Health & IUCN Wildlife Health Specialist Group

- [Avian Influenza and Wildlife: Risk management for people working with wild birds](#)

Australian Veterinary Emergency Plan (AUSVETPLAN)

- The Avian Influenza AUSVETPLAN sets out the nationally agreed response approach to Avian Influenza outbreaks in Australia. This includes agreed policy in Australia with respect to LPAI or HPAI detection in wild birds.
- The AUSVETPLAN Disease Strategy for Avian Influenza can be downloaded from [Animal Health Australia website](#) under “Disease-specific documents”.