

# H5 Avian Influenza (H5 Bird Flu) and Wildlife

## Advice for veterinarians and other animal health professionals

Version 4.0, January 2026

This advice is targeted to veterinarians and other animal health professionals who are routinely presented with sick or dead wildlife in wildlife care facility settings such as veterinary clinics, wildlife hospitals and rehabilitation centres. It provides information on disease reporting and investigation relevant to H5 bird flu, as well as biosecurity measures to reduce risks to animal health professionals, other people, and animals. For people working with wildlife in the field, such as **bird banders, wildlife rangers and researchers**, see the relevant [WHA advice document: H5 bird flu advice for people working with wildlife in the field](#).

Avian influenza, including H5 bird flu is a [notifiable disease](#). If you suspect a sick or dead animal may be infected with avian influenza - **REPORT** via the [Emergency Animal Disease Hotline](#) on 1800 675 888.

## What is H5 Bird Flu?

Bird flu is also known as "[avian influenza](#)" or "AI". The different strains of bird flu viruses are classified as either low pathogenicity (LPAI) or high pathogenicity (HPAI). Which group a bird flu virus belongs to depends on how seriously it affects poultry. HPAI bird flu viruses can cause serious illness and death in poultry, and sometimes also in wild birds.

H5 bird flu is also known as *high pathogenicity avian influenza H5N1*. It includes the serious and highly contagious H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b strain which has been spreading globally since 2021 through the movement of wild birds, with unprecedented impact. **H5 bird flu has not been detected in Australia.**

H5 bird flu has caused significant illness and deaths in poultry, wild birds and mammals in all geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand). Overseas it has infected more than 560 bird species and more than 100 mammalian species, including wild marine and land mammals. The current global situation means an increased level of risk to Australia via the movements of infected wild birds from the northern hemisphere, from regions just to the north of Australia, or from Antarctic/Sub-Antarctic regions<sup>1</sup>. H5 bird flu 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 H5 bird flu in wildlife see the [WHA H5 bird flu FAQs](#) and the [WHA Avian influenza in wildlife in Australia Fact Sheet](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Wildlife Health Australia (2025) Technical Update - Global High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza in Wildlife Available from: [https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/Portals/0/Incidents/HPAI\\_Technical\\_Update.pdf](https://wildlifehealthaustralia.com.au/Portals/0/Incidents/HPAI_Technical_Update.pdf)

## Species affected

- **Wild birds:** All wild bird species should be considered potentially susceptible to H5 bird flu. Overseas, wild birds commonly affected by H5 bird flu include waterfowl, shorebirds, seabirds and predatory or scavenging species.
- **Domestic poultry and captive birds:** poultry (e.g. chickens, turkeys) are particularly susceptible to H5 bird flu, but it should be assumed that all domestic bird species can be infected.
- **Wild mammals:** terrestrial mammals, especially carnivores (e.g. foxes) and marine mammals (e.g. seals, sea lions), are susceptible to H5 bird flu. Infection of terrestrial mammals is presumed to occur via consuming infected birds through predation or scavenging. Infection of marine mammals is thought to have occurred via close contact with, or ingestion of infected birds, or contact with marine environments contaminated with virus from infected birds.
- **Domestic mammals:** a range of domestic mammals (including livestock and pets) have been reported with H5 bird flu, including domestic cats, dogs and cattle.

## Clinical signs and how to report

Infected live birds or mammals may show a wide range of clinical signs, including:

- neurological signs (ataxia, paralysis, seizures, tremors, abnormal posture, head tilt, behavioural abnormalities)
- respiratory signs (conjunctivitis, nasal and oral discharge, sneezing, oedema of the head, dyspnoea, tachypnoea)
- gastrointestinal signs (diarrhoea)
- sudden death, including the potential for mass mortality events
- some species may be asymptomatic or show only very mild clinical signs. In some cases, animals may die suddenly without displaying any clinical signs.

**Avian influenza, including H5 bird flu is a notifiable disease. If you suspect a sick or dead animal may be infected with avian influenza - REPORT via the Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888<sup>2</sup>.**

Following reporting, authorities will evaluate the need for further investigation and laboratory testing. Whether further investigation is undertaken will consider multiple factors including the number of sick or dead animals, species affected, clinical signs, and ability to collect appropriate samples for laboratory testing. Even if testing is not undertaken, all reports help inform our understanding of the disease and how to manage it.

**If sample collection is required, you will be advised on appropriate collection and laboratory submission protocols by your state or territory animal health authority.**

## Human infections

- Bird flu viruses, including H5 bird flu, have the potential to infect humans.
- Human infections with bird flu are rare, usually mild, and are generally associated with close contact with infected animals or their environments.
- Where possible, it is recommended to **avoid** contact with sick or dead wildlife and their immediate environment (e.g., land or waterways in which sick or dead wildlife have been observed).
- **If handling or sampling potentially infected wildlife, precautions should be taken** (see advice below).
- It is safe to eat properly cooked eggs, meat and poultry products.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

## What to do during routine wild animal care activities

- Become familiar with the clinical signs associated with H5 bird flu in wild animals.
- Operate with an increased awareness of the potential risk of H5 bird flu in wild animals.
- Always maintain good hygiene and biosecurity practices before, during and after working with wildlife (see [Biosecurity and PPE](#) below).
- If you suspect an animal may be infected with avian influenza, remember to **report** it.

## Biosecurity & personal protective equipment (PPE)

The following measures should always be taken by veterinarians and animal health professionals when handling and sampling wildlife, even if the animals appear healthy:

- Use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves, a facemask and eye protection, and ensure PPE is removed properly to avoid self-contamination.
- Particular attention should be given to hand washing after handling animals, after contact with potentially contaminated materials and after removal of gloves. Hands and arms should be washed with abundant soap and warm water, then dried thoroughly. Hand sanitizer (gel with 60 to 90% ethanol concentration) can be applied to reinforce disinfection but should not replace proper handwashing.
- Take care to avoid rubbing eyes or touching the mouth, eating, drinking, or smoking until hands are clean.
- Handle wildlife in a well-lit and well-ventilated area to minimise the possibility of inhaling dried faecal or other material.
- Use a clean or new pair of gloves for each animal.
- PPE and potentially contaminated equipment should be thoroughly cleaned after use, followed by disinfection, or disposed of appropriately.
- Where possible, veterinarians and animal health professionals should avoid contact with domestic birds and poultry for 48 hours after handling wild birds.
- For further information on best practice biosecurity measures for those working with wildlife, see the [National Wildlife Biosecurity Guidelines](#), the AVA Policy on [HPAI in pet birds, backyard poultry and wild birds](#), and AVA Guidelines for [Veterinary personal biosecurity and PPE](#).

## More information and resources

The WHA website [H5 Bird Flu resource centre](#) includes information and links to resources for:

- Animal health professionals and wildlife care providers
- Wildlife managers
- Communication about H5 bird flu
- H5 bird flu human health considerations



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