H5 BIRD FLU

Wildlife Health AUSTRALIA

FAQs

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What is H5 bird flu?

Bird flu is also known as "avian influenza" (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.**

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How does H5 bird flu differ from other bird flu viruses?

The H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b strain of H5 bird flu differs from other bird flu viruses because of its recent geographic spread and the **frequency and severity of its impacts**. It originated in Asia, but since 2021 has spread across Europe to North and South America and, recently, Antarctica and sub-Antarctic islands. All geographical regions except Oceania (which includes Australia and New Zealand) have been affected.

The speed and extent of the **global spread of this strain of H5 bird flu is very unusual** for a bird flu virus. It has also affected a very wide range of species, including both domesticated and wild birds and mammals. **Millions of wild animals have now died worldwide due to H5 bird flu**. Overseas it has infected more than 560 bird species and more than 100 mammalian species, including wild marine and land mammals.

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Can humans contract H5 bird flu?

Bird flu viruses, including H5 bird flu, have the potential to infect humans.

Human infections with H5 bird flu are rare, usually mild, and are generally associated with close contact with infected animals or their environments.

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).

For more information on how to stay safe, see the see interim Australian Centre for Disease Control (CDC) website, Advice for people in contact with wild birds (e.g., hunters and wildlife carers), CDNA national guidelines for avian influenza – protecting people who work with birds and wildlife, and the Bird flu toolkit for people who work with birds.

H5 bird flu is not a food safety concern, and it is safe to eat properly handled and cooked poultry meat, eggs and egg products. Visit the Food Standards Australia New Zealand website for more information.

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How might H5 bird flu arrive in Australia?

The most likely way for H5 bird flu to arrive in Australia is through the migration of wild birds from overseas. **These wild bird movements cannot be prevented.** Once in Australia, H5 bird flu could 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.).

The annual **Spring** (August – November) **migration of wild shorebirds from the northern hemisphere to Australia** is the most likely way for H5 bird flu to arrive here. Most of these wild birds first arrive in northern parts of the country, however some fly directly to other locations around Australia.

It is also possible that H5 bird flu could arrive here through waterfowl entering from regions just to the north of Australia, or seabirds travelling to Australia from Antarctic/Sub-Antarctic regions. These wild bird movements can occur at any time of the year.

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How can I tell if a wild animal has H5 bird flu?

The signs of H5 bird flu infection in wildlife can vary widely. For example, animals may appear weak or unresponsive, display signs such as seizures, incoordination or breathing difficulties, or die suddenly without showing any signs of ill health.

More information on the **possible signs of H5 bird flu** infection in wildlife is available on our website.

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What might an H5 bird flu outbreak in wildlife look like?

Outbreaks of H5 bird flu in wildlife overseas have most often been marked by the **sudden occurrence and rapid increase in numbers of sick and dead wildlife**.

Very large numbers of wild animals and a wide range of different species may be affected. The species most affected overseas have varied widely from region to region: for example, terns were heavily impacted in Scotland, birds of prey in the USA, pelicans in Peru, penguins in South Africa and seals and sealions in Argentina.

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What could happen to Australian wildlife if H5 bird flu arrives?

Based on the effects of H5 bird flu elsewhere around the world, outbreaks in Australian wildlife are likely to result in **sickness and subsequent deaths in a range of wild birds and some mammals**.

There is **uncertainty about how H5 bird flu will affect Australia's unique animals**, but we can make some predictions based on patterns observed elsewhere. Overseas, frequently affected wild birds

include waterfowl (e.g., ducks, swans and geese), shorebirds (e.g., wading birds), seabirds (e.g., gulls and terns) and predatory or scavenging birds (e.g., eagles and other birds of prey). Although we assume that H5 bird flu could infect any wild bird, Australian species in these categories are likely to be more at risk.

Based on wild mammal cases overseas, **infections are most likely to occur in predatory or scavenging wild mammals, and marine mammals that have close contact with seabirds** (e.g., seals and sealions). Marsupials that are predators or scavengers (e.g. Tasmanian devil, quolls) are expected to be more at risk than plant-eating marsupials like kangaroos. No bat cases have been reported overseas and only a few species of rodent have reportedly been affected worldwide.

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How would Australia respond to an outbreak of H5 bird flu?

The approach to Avian influenza outbreaks in Australia are described in the AUSVETPLAN Disease Strategy: Avian Influenza. Arrangements for responding to incursions of H5 HPAI in wildlife are agreed in the National Management Agreement – H5 HPAI in wildlife with broad decisions on response and recovery activities being made at a national level.

Response activities in wildlife will vary depending on the specifics of the outbreak but may include: **restriction on visitors and activities** at certain sites or wildlife populations; enhanced **biosecurity and hygiene measures**; enhanced **disease surveillance**; **carcass management** and **emergency conservation measures**.

Culling, containing or dispersing wild animals and the **destruction, broadscale disinfection or modification of habitat** are ineffective measures for avian influenza control and are not considered as appropriate measures under Australia's response policies to avian influenza.

Vaccination of rare, protected and valuable native birds could be considered in the event of a H5 bird flu outbreak in Australia under the Use of avian influenza vaccines for the protection of rare, protected and valuable avian species policy, however the broadscale vaccination of birds in the wild is not considered appropriate, feasible or practicable. The Australian Government has procured an inactivated H5 bird flu vaccine and is currently undertaking vaccine trials to provide safety data for vaccine use in small Australian bird species (non-poultry).

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What should I do if I suspect H5 bird flu in a wild animal?

Unfortunately, wildlife that become infected and develop signs of illness from H5 bird flu generally die within a few days of becoming sick. **There is no treatment for H5 bird flu in wildlife**.

If you suspect a wild animal may be infected with H5 bird flu:

- **AVOID** – keep yourself and others safe. Do not make direct or indirect contact with sick or dead wildlife or their immediate environment. Observe from a distance and keep pets away.
- **RECORD** – make a note of what you observe, including: number of animals affected, species/type of animal, location, date and time. Take photos or videos if safe to do so.
- **REPORT** – **multiple sick or dead wild animals via the** Emergency Animal Disease Hotline **on 1800 675 888.**

Avian influenza is a notifiable disease which means if you suspect an animal may be affected, you must report it. Reporting will alert authorities so they can evaluate the need for investigation.

More avian influenza resources are available from Wildlife Health Australia on our H5 bird flu resources centre, including advice for the general public on 'What to do if you encounter sick or dead wildlife'.

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What is being done to monitor for H5 bird flu in Australian wild birds?

There are several ways that Australia is monitoring for the arrival of H5 bird flu in wildlife. As part of the National Avian Influenza Wild Bird surveillance program, government and university **researchers from all over Australia routinely sample healthy wild bird populations** to look for bird flu viruses. Since the inception of this program, over 155,000 samples have been tested.

Due to the increased risks posed by H5 bird flu, this **surveillance has been expanded** in the last 3 years to include more species and more sampling locations.

Wildlife Health Australia also **maintains a network of surveillance partners** in zoos, veterinary clinics, universities and other agencies who contribute data on sick and dead wildlife to the national wildlife health database. Through these partners, **events involving sick and dead birds are regularly investigated** by state and territory animal health authorities to rule out H5 bird flu as a cause of illness.

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How is Australia preparing to protect wildlife from the impacts of H5 bird flu?

Commonwealth, State and Territory government agencies, wildlife managers, industry partners, Traditional Owners, ecologists, researchers, wildlife care providers and organisations like Wildlife Health Australia are **working collaboratively to prepare and plan for the possible arrival of H5 bird flu**.

The Australian Government is investing in enhancing national preparedness and response capability – you can find further information and read more about the government response here.

These webinars provide more information on current planning for the wildlife sector:

- Biodiversity Council webinar, 'Preparing for impacts of bird flu on Australian wildlife'

- Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry 'Webinar: Preparing for H5 avian influenza (bird flu)'
- Wildlife Health Australia, 'H5 bird flu in Wildlife'

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I work with wildlife, what do I need to know?

Steps you can take to help protect Australian wildlife include **being aware of the signs of H5 bird flu** and reporting multiple sick or dead wild animals to the Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888. **If in doubt, report**.

Wildlife Health Australia has developed **Risk Mitigation Toolboxes** to assist wildlife managers and wildlife care providers with their preparations for the possible arrival of H5 bird flu in Australia. AviFluMap is a new online tool designed to support wildlife managers and biosecurity stakeholders in assessing and responding to the risk of H5 bird flu in Australia's wild bird populations.

Other useful resources for people who work with wildlife are available on the Wildlife Health Australia website, including advice for veterinarians and other animal health professionals and people working with wildlife in the field.

For further information or if you have specific queries, please contact the animal health agency in your jurisdiction.

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