



TECHNICAL REPORT

ECDC SCIENTIFIC ADVICE

**Health advice for people living in
or travelling to countries where the
A/H5N1 virus has been detected
Version April 2006**

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Introduction

Influenza type A/H5N1 (*bird flu*) has infected birds in many countries in Europe and world-wide. For the moment, in the EU, the birds most commonly infected are wild water fowl such as swans and ducks. It has also occasionally infected other animals. It has also infected some other animals (such as cats). As a bird virus it does not easily cross from birds to humans though in a very few instances it has done so, mostly outside Europe.

People that have been infected in other parts of the world had been in close contact with live or dead infected birds, principally domestic poultry.

That makes H5N1 another '*zoonosis*', an animal infection that can also affect humans and animals. There are many other zoonoses already present in Europe, such as salmonella and campylobacter in cattle and poultry, toxoplasmosis and toxocara in cats and dogs, rabies in foxes and bats, etc.

There are already standard precautions that have to be taken to protect humans from zoonoses. Hence most of actions that need to be taken to protect people and their families against H5N1 are just applying common sense or simple rules of good hygiene. Examples would be not handling sick wild animals and the rules for food hygiene and safe food preparation.

Specific measures are in place to protect in the European Union to protect commercial poultry and to prevent infected birds entering the food chain. In any case, thorough cooking ensures that meat and eggs are free of any virus. Hence the risk to the public of catching the H5N1 virus from live animals or from poultry products is very low. Certainly there is **no need to change the food that you eat or travel plans because of H5N1.**

In areas of the EU (and many other European countries which follow EU rules) where H5N1 has been detected and is circulating either in wild birds or domestic poultry special veterinary measures are in place. The present document provides general advice for people living in those areas, including poultry owners.

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Knowledge about H5N1 is constantly improving. Also the virus is still spreading in wild-life. Equally influenza viruses themselves often change over time and specific influenza viruses appear for a while, and then go away. Hence this guidance will be improved as changes occur. Regular updates on what is known about influenza viruses as they affect human health appear on the ECDC web-sites where there are also links to other relevant web-sites including that of the European Commission.

Twelve Questions and Answers

1. Where is Influenza Type A/H5N1 (*bird flu*) to be found?

In EU Countries H5N1 has been detected in wild birds in many places. It also has been found occasionally in domestic birds. That does **not** mean bird flu is in those places for the future. Some of the infected birds have been migrating and anyway birds living in the country may only be infected temporarily. However given the movements of wild birds it is probably best to imagine that H5N1 may, in the future be found in certain wild birds in many if not most EU countries. That is not the position yet but it seems to be the way things are going.

Are all wild birds affected?

No. The H5N1 viruses seem best adapted to water living birds, the wild-fowl ducks, swans etc. However beyond them we are seeing a number of other species affected occasionally so that it is not possible to easily say which birds are and are not affected.

Are other animals affected?

Yes but it is rare. A few animals that will eat birds have become infected including cats that have been out hunting. That is why when there is a proven outbreak in birds those responsible for animal health may recommend people restrict the movement of their domestic cats.

2. Who is at risk?

Please refer to the Table at the end of the Risk Assessment Document.

3. What standard precautions should be taken, concerning wild birds, animals and poultry?

You and your family should follow:

General Hygiene

- Exercise good personal hygiene with frequent hand washing
- Make sure food is prepared hygienically in a clean environment and follow the basic rules of food safety

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Specific to H5N1 and other zoonoses

- Remember children are at somewhat higher risk of infection with zoonoses than adults
- Avoid direct contact with live poultry and wild birds unless absolutely necessary (young children in particular should not be allowed to have close contact with poultry or with bird or animal waste)
- Try to avoid direct contact with bird and animal faeces, untreated bird feathers and other animal and bird waste. Where direct contact has been unavoidable (e.g. from walking and bird faeces getting on shoes) sensible hygiene precautions should be taken (e.g. cleaning shoes and hand washing).
- Especially avoid handling sick birds or animals or birds found dead
- Generally avoid visiting live animal markets
- When visiting farms children in particular should stay away working areas which includes any area with farm animals
- Where you or your children may have had contact with animals or birds e.g. from caring for pets, when visiting 'children's farms' or going where there may have been bird or other animal faeces make sure you follow basic hygiene rules (see Question 2.)

4. What do I do if I or my family have come into direct contact with poultry, wild birds or other animals or their waste in an area where H5N1 has been detected?

The guidelines are the same as for anywhere areas:

- Wash hands well with soap and water after any contact and
- Remove your shoes outside the house and clean them of all dirt
- Follow the standard rules for food hygiene
http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/No_07_AI_Nov05_en.pdf

In addition

- If you or a family member who has had contact with sick or dead poultry, wild birds or other animals develop a significant temperature ($>38^{\circ}\text{C}$) and / or a respiratory infection or diarrhoea get advice from a doctor or nurse or visit the nearest health care facility. It is important to mention any significant exposures (e.g. contact with sick poultry or a dead wild bird). The chances of this being H5N1 is very slim but its best to be safe and the illness may be caused by another zoonosis.

5. What is different when H5N1 has been confirmed locally recently in domestic or wild birds or other animals?

When a highly pathogenic bird flu, especially H5N1 has been confirmed locally in poultry, special veterinary emergency rules and procedures come into play, such as preventing movement of domestic birds and increasing surveillance in what are called Protection and Surveillance Zones. Hygiene rules also become tighter, for example to prevent ordinary people accidentally carrying the infection from one farm to another on their shoes or vehicles. If you are in one of these areas the local authorities will let you know what these rules say. After a certain period these rules are then relaxed back to the normal level.

6. What do I do if I encounter sick and dead poultry or wild birds?

Birds die – wild and domestic – and so coming across individual dying or dead birds is quite a common experience. What is unusual is to come across unusually numbers of dying or dead birds or animals which suggests this may be due to a *highly pathogenic* infection such as H5N1. Similarly for those who have domestic birds if unusually high numbers of their birds die. They should:

- Inform the authorities immediately
- Leave the handling of the animal to experienced personnel

7. What should I do if I am travelling abroad to protect against Bird Flu?

The advice now for people traveling to other countries in the EU and outside is now little different from that staying in their own country. So travellers are reminded of the following standard precautions to avoid avian influenza:

- To avoid contact with live poultry and wild birds
- To avoid visiting live animal markets and poultry farms
- To avoid contact with surfaces contaminated with animal faeces (droppings)
- To avoid handling birds found dead
- Not to eat or handle undercooked or raw poultry, egg or duck dishes
- Exercise good personal hygiene with frequent hand washing
- Do not attempt to bring any live poultry or uncooked poultry products back into the EU from outside

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It is **not** recommended that travellers take with them the neuraminidase inhibitor, Oseltamivir (Tamiflu[®]) unless they may be exposed to avian influenza through their work e.g. veterinarians working to control HPAI.

There are general and specific hazards to do with traveling abroad and advice should be sought ahead of time. Authoritative sources of advice are obtainable on most EU national public health or surveillance institute web sites.

8. What additional precautions should be taken by "commercial", "backyard" or "hobby" poultry owners?

Follow the instructions of the local veterinary authorities to prevent any possible spread of H5N1 virus to your poultry;

Inform immediately the veterinary authorities in case your poultry become sick;

Never make use of any sick poultry for the preparation of food and do not use eggs from sick hens;

Follow very good hygiene practice when you butcher and defeather poultry for consumption within your own family;

Make especially sure that children and people visiting know how to protect themselves

9. What precautions should be taken in relation to food?

Nothing has changed here. The usual guidance on food safety should be followed.

Follow the established rules of food hygiene such as

http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/No_07_AI_Nov05_en.pdf

These include

- Do not eat or handle undercooked or raw poultry or egg dishes
- Poultry should be prepared hygienically and thoroughly cooked to an internal temperature of 70°C or above
- Take care in handling raw eggs and shells
- Wash egg shells in soapy water and wash hands afterwards
- Eggs should be cooked thoroughly

In addition:

- Do not use poultry from areas where the virus has been found recently for preparing food for humans and/or animals. Even seemingly healthy-looking poultry of any kind from a bird-flu affected area should not be used for food.

10. How do I protect myself and my family from zoonoses that my domestic animals and pets may be carrying?

Again it comes down to good sense and good hygiene. Always wash hands after handling animals, especially before eating or drinking

Animal waste (faeces and urine etc) should be seen as potentially hazardous. It is a good idea to wear gloves when handling cat litter etc and certainly to wash hands afterwards

When animals get sick it's a good idea to consult a vet who can advise you but take special care to exercise good hygiene

Prohibit children from cuddling or comforting sick animals

If you see unusual illness that look like an infection (a number of your animals getting sick at once) tell the local authorities that deal with animal health.

11. Cats have been infected with H5N1 – does this mean I or my family are at risk from our animals at home?

Cats can become infected with H5N1 and can infect other cats they are in close contact with them. However the risk of any specific cat catching the virus from a wild bird is very small indeed and we do not know if they can transmit the infection to humans.

Therefore the rules specifically in relation to H5N1 are

- Sick domestic animals that eat meat and might have eaten infected birds (i.e. you in an area where H5N1 has been reported recently) should be treated as a possible infection hazard.
- do not handle the animal unless you have to and then use gloves.

12. Is there any risk from bathing where there are wild birds?

Risk assessments have been undertaken on this by authorities in Europe and these suggest that the risk, if there is any is incredibly small at present because the current form of H5N1 virus is poorly adapted to humans. It also does not survive for very long in water, especially salt water.

There are higher risks of other infections, most of them are from humans not birds or other animals. That is why the European Union has recently adopted a new Bathing

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Water Directive and most EU countries monitor the quality of water where people bathe in fresh or sea water. <http://europa.eu.int/water/water-bathing/report.html>

13. Can people catch H5N1 from other people?

Even when people have really been infected with H5N1 the risk of them passing this on seems to be very low. Though person to person transmission has happened it seems to be very rare. So there is very little risk from people with H5N1 though when cases have occurred it is important that other people in the same household and nearby are quickly investigated to see if they need treatment as they may have also been exposed to the virus.