

Avian Influenza

Avian influenza, sometimes called bird flu, is a viral infection that mainly affects birds, although it can 'spill over' to mammals.

There are different types of avian influenza viruses—they do not spread easily from animals to humans, or between humans. Avian influenza generally only spreads to people who have had a lot of close unprotected contact with infected birds or other infected animals.

There has never been a case of avian influenza in humans reported in Aotearoa New Zealand. In other countries where avian influenza is present, human infection has generally only been found in people who have had a lot of contact with infected birds or other infected animals. Currently, the risk of human infection is low in Aotearoa.



Signs and symptoms – what you can see and feel

Symptoms of avian influenza in people may range from no symptoms to mild illness, to severe illness or death. Symptoms of avian influenza include:

- high fever (more than 38°C) or feeling hot and shivery
- aching muscles
- headache
- a cough or shortness of breath
- diarrhoea
- stomach pain
- chest pain
- bleeding from the nose or gums
- conjunctivitis (eye or eyelid redness and swelling).



How avian influenza spreads

Avian influenza can be spread from animals to humans through close unprotected contact (such as not using personal protective equipment like gloves, a face mask and eye protection) with an infected bird or other animal, or their droppings, saliva, or contaminated materials. This can include touching your eyes, nose, or mouth after touching:

- infected live or dead birds or other animals
- droppings or poo, or other animal fluids (urine, blood, mucus) of infected birds or other animals.

Humans with avian influenza do not easily spread the virus to other humans. When this has occurred, it was due to very close and prolonged contact with a sick person.



People at higher risk

Those at risk of avian influenza have almost always been people who have prolonged, unprotected contact with sick or dead birds, other animals with avian influenza, and their environments or bodily fluids as listed above.

It is unclear if there are specific groups of people that may be at higher risk of severe disease from avian influenza, however the risk of severe disease with seasonal influenza is increased for those who are:

- Māori or Pacific, and aged 55 and over
- aged 65 years or over
- infants
- young children
- pregnant or have just given birth
- immunocompromised
- obese
- suffering with chronic health conditions or serious mental health or addiction issues.



Seeking medical help

If you or someone you know develops symptoms of avian influenza or you're feeling concerned in general, please seek medical help. This is especially important if you have unprotected close contact with birds. Contact your GP, doctor or healthcare provider for advice.

You can also call Healthline on 0800 611 116, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information. In an emergency call 111. If English isn't your first language Healthline has interpreters available. If you have a disability or are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have a speech impediment please see healthcare services listed at the end of this information sheet.

Your healthcare provider may consider taking a throat, nose and/or eye swab to test for infection if you have recently:

- been exposed to animals or humans with avian influenza infection and have symptoms of avian influenza
- had very close unprotected exposure to animals or humans to some very infectious strains of avian influenza (even if you don't have symptoms).



Prevention

Avian influenza vaccines are not currently used anywhere in the world. However, the seasonal human influenza (flu) vaccination is recommended for some people who work with animals and are therefore at higher risk of exposure to the virus.

Although the flu vaccine will not protect people against avian influenza, it will protect them against seasonal flu and reduce their risk of becoming infected with both types of influenza at the same time. There is a possibility that if a person is infected with both viruses, the viruses

could share genetic material (reassortment) to produce a new and highly infectious virus that may pose a threat to the wider community.

If you work with livestock or poultry or with animals in a vet or zoo, it is recommended you see your GP, doctor or local pharmacy to get a flu vaccination once a year when they are available during 'flu' season. For more information on the flu vaccine visit www.info.health.nz/flu

If you are going tramping, camping, hunting, walking dogs near bird colonies, or going anywhere where you may be exposed to wild birds or marine mammals, you are recommended to do the following.

- If you see 3 or more sick or dead wild birds in a group, report it immediately to Biosecurity New Zealand's Exotic Pest and Disease Hotline on 0800 80 99 66.
- If you find any sick or dead wild birds, avoid contact with them or their body fluids. Do not allow tamariki (children), dogs or other animals to go near or handle them.
- Maintain good hand hygiene. Wash your hands either with soap and running water, or use alcohol hand sanitiser often and thoroughly—especially before and after contact with animals and their environment.

If you are travelling overseas:

- Check the Safe Travel website for up to date health advice for each country you are visiting: www.safetravel.govt.nz
- Check you are up to date with any relevant immunisations for the country or countries you are visiting. Contact your doctor or healthcare provider to discuss and seek advice.
- If you are travelling to areas affected by avian influenza, you should avoid:
 - farms and live animal markets, entering areas where animals may be slaughtered, or surfaces that appear contaminated with animal poos (faeces) or other animal body fluids.
 - close contact with wild or domesticated birds.

Avian influenza is sensitive to heat treatment, meaning that cooked food and pasteurised milk is safe to consume. You cannot catch avian influenza through eating fully cooked poultry or eggs, or drinking pasteurised milk, even in areas with an outbreak.



What happens if I get avian influenza?

People who get avian influenza may need hospital care. Your local public health service will contact you or your whānau to provide you with guidance and support. Antiviral treatment medicine may be offered to you to reduce the amount of virus in your body so you do not get as sick. If you have avian influenza and are not in hospital you should isolate (stay home) to reduce the risk of giving avian influenza to others. You should stay home until the end of your infectious period, which is either 7 days after your symptoms first started or if you're still unwell after that time, until your major symptoms go away and you are feeling better.



What do exposed people and contacts need to do?

An exposed person is someone who has had close contact with any animal, animal matter or bodily fluids, or a contaminated environment that is confirmed or highly suspected to be infected with avian influenza.

A contact is someone who has had face to face or physical contact with a person who is

confirmed to have avian influenza, their secretions or their laboratory samples during the time this person was infectious.

Exposed people and contacts may be at increased risk of developing avian influenza. The local public health service will contact all identified exposed people and contacts of an animal or human case of avian influenza to provide them with appropriate guidance and support.

- Antiviral medicine may be offered to some people if they were exposed to the virus. This depends on the strain of virus, and their level of risk of getting infected. If the strains of avian influenza has never infected humans, or the level or risk is low, antivirals will not be routinely recommended.
- For some strains of the virus, and some risk levels, people may be asked to stay away from some locations considered to be high-risk (e.g. farms/animal shows, healthcare settings and large gatherings) and individuals at higher risk of severe illness if they were to get the virus (e.g. people who are immunosuppressed, pregnant, young children and the very old).
- If people develop symptoms, they should isolate (stay away) from others as soon as possible and contact their local public health service immediately for further advice:
www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/PublicHealthContacts



For free general health advice and information

Call Healthline on **0800 611 116**, anytime 24/7 for free health advice. You can choose to speak with a Māori clinician if you are calling between 8am and 8pm. Interpreter services (if English isn't your first language) and NZ Relay support are also available.

Free NZ Relay Services are available at nzrelay.co.nz if you are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have a speech impediment.

For people living or visiting rurally, you can contact a doctor after hours at Ka Ora Telecare **0800 2 KA ORA (0800 252 672)** or www.kaora.co.nz.



Disability Helpline

A dedicated Disability Helpline is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to support disabled people. Call free on **0800 11 12 13** or text **8988** for help and information.



For more information visit:

- <https://info.health.nz/conditions-treatments/infectious-diseases/avian-influenza>
- [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/influenza-\(avian-and-other-zoonotic\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/influenza-(avian-and-other-zoonotic))
- <https://www.mpi.govt.nz/biosecurity/pest-and-disease-threats-to-new-zealand/animal-disease-threats-to-new-zealand/high-pathogenicity-avian-influenza/>
- <https://www.doc.govt.nz/our-work/wildlife-health/avian-influenza/>