

Avian Flu Q&A

(for Visitors, Volunteers & Property Staff)

Q1 What is Avian Flu?

Avian influenza (bird flu) is a disease of birds caused by avian influenza viruses. There are many types of these viruses. The majority do not cause disease and occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses, but usually do not get sick from them. However, these non-disease-causing viruses can occasionally mutate within domestic birds e.g. poultry, and cause high levels of bird mortality.

Q2 What is H5N1?

H5N1 is the strain of Avian flu virus currently causing deaths in poultry and some wild birds in southeast and central Asia, continental Europe, the Middle East and Nigeria. This strain has caused some human infections and deaths in Asia, Turkey and Iraq.

Q3 How is it spread?

The usual route of spread of infection is by the movements of infected domestic birds, their products or objects contaminated with their faeces. The outbreaks of H5N1 in the Black Sea and Caspian Sea areas suggest that wild birds may have spread the disease locally between regions, although this link has not been proven and movements of infected domestic birds or their products cannot be ruled out.

Q4 Can the disease be spread to humans?

A Human influenza (flu) is usually caused by human influenza viruses, which circulate within the human population. However, people living or working in close contact with *infected* domestic birds (e.g. poultry farmers/keepers or those involved in slaughter or disease control operations) can be at risk from excessive exposure to the bird viruses as has happened with this H5N1 strain. The recent human cases in Turkey and Iraq, reported in April 06, concerned people living in close proximity to infected poultry. If a human becomes infected with a bird virus this usually cannot be passed to another person. A problem arises if the Avian influenza virus mutates or combines with a human influenza virus within an infected person. In this situation, human-to-human transmission can occur and create a more serious human health issue. Cases of H5N1 in humans have been in countries where people live and work in close proximity to poultry, and where hygiene and bio-security measures may not be as high as in the UK.

Q5 Has it come to the UK?

H5N1 virus has now reached the UK, though for the moment (as at 5th February 2007) there have only been two incidences:

- The first was in a wild swan on the 6th April 2006 in Fife, Scotland
- The present outbreak on a commercial turkey farm in Suffolk

To minimise the risk of the disease now spreading, the government has introduced restrictions on imports of all birds and bird products from the countries that have had outbreaks, and introduced a ban on commercial imports of live birds from outside the EU. There remains a continuing risk of the disease spreading further in the UK in illegally imported birds.

There is also a possibility of migratory birds bringing in the infection although it is still not fully known to what extent wild birds carry this infection.

The spring migration of water birds throughout Europe will shortly begin. Relatively small numbers of ducks breed in Britain, and some of these will migrate through France in the coming weeks on route to

Britain. The majority of ducks that winter in western Europe will, however, move east to breeding grounds in eastern Europe and Russia.

Thus, most ducks, geese and swans will leave Britain and Ireland at this time of year, rather than arrive here. Consequently, the overall risk from migratory birds generally is still considered to be low: the case in Fife was believed to be of a migratory bird, but the route of its infection is as yet unclear. It may have been washed up from the sea rather than actually having arrived on UK land.

Q6 Should people stay away from the Countryside?

There is no need for people to reduce their visits to the countryside. DEFRA and DCMS* are working with Visit Britain and other tourism and heritage organisations to ensure that members of the general public are given accurate and balanced advice about access to the countryside and rural visitor sites.

*Department of Culture, Media and Sport

Q7 Are there risks to visiting places where there are wild birds?

The disease is not in the UK at present and there are no confirmed cases of wild birds infecting humans. The European Commission considers that Avian flu does not represent a risk to the general public.

Q8 Is it safe to visit National Trust Properties?

Yes it is.

Although the H5N1 strain of avian flu was recently confirmed in a commercial turkey farm at Holton in Suffolk, there have been no restrictions on public access to the countryside. DEFRA has made it clear that 'even if the disease spreads, we expect there to be little need to restrict access'.

Avian flu is a disease of birds. It is very rare for it to pass to humans. To do so requires extremely close contact with infected birds, or their droppings. There is no confirmed case of it being caught from wild birds.

To minimise this already negligible risk to human health, our advice to visitors is to avoid direct contact with birds or their droppings. If such contact is made sensible precautions such as washing hands are advisable.

Q9 Can I feed the birds?

Feeding birds remains safe, but it is sensible to wash your hands thoroughly after filling or cleaning bird feeders or feeding pigeons or ducks. You are advised not to let birds feed out of your hands and, again, to wash your hands thoroughly if you come into contact with bird droppings, especially before eating or drinking. Young children should be closely supervised in parks with waterfowl to ensure they don't come into contact with potentially infected material (droppings). You should avoid direct contact with wild ducks/swans and particularly if they are ill or dead.

Q10 Are there risks from touching bird droppings?

It is a good idea not to touch faeces of any sort! If you do, make sure you wash your hands as soon as possible, and don't touch your eyes or mouth or eat or drink until you've done so. Children should be closely supervised in parks with waterfowl to ensure they don't transfer potentially infected material to their's or other children's faces.

Parents should always encourage a positive approach to hygiene and ensure children wash their hands with soap and hot water before eating and especially if they suspect that they have come into physical contact with farm animals, waterfowl or their droppings.

Q11 What should I do if I see a sick or dead bird?

Birds die all the time, for all sorts of different reasons, and you are likely to come across them from time to time. Do not touch any dead birds - or any other animals - that you find.

If you find dead wild gulls, waders, ducks, geese or swans and you are within a survey area or unsure whether you are in a surveillance area please contact the **Defra helpline 08459 33 55 77 and choose the Avian Influenza option which will be open from 8:30am - 8pm, 7 days a week, (or ring DARD on 02890 524999 if you live in Northern Ireland)**. You will be asked for details of your finding and its location. Please see the [wild bird surveillance](#) pages for more information. If you find any other single dead birds, including garden birds then you do not need to call the Defra helpline.

If you find die offs involving 10 or more dead birds of the same species or from different species in the same place you should contact the **Defra Helpline 08459 33 55 77 and choose the Avian Influenza option which will be open from 8:30am - 8pm, 7 days a week (or ring DARD on 02890 524999 if you live in Northern Ireland)**.

They will consider if the case needs further investigation. Remember, even large numbers of birds found dead together could have died from poisoning, pollution, other diseases or simply because of cold weather – it doesn't necessarily mean they have died of Avian flu.

If you should see any dead birds while visiting our Properties, please make sure that you do not touch the bird and inform a member of staff at the earliest convenience / opportunity.

Q12 Is it safe to eat chicken and eggs in National Trust restaurants?

Yes. On the basis of current scientific evidence, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) advises that avian flu does not pose a food safety risk for UK consumers. Also, the FSA is not aware of any reports of people handling poultry meat becoming infected with avian flu.

National Trust operated restaurants meet strict health and safety, food hygiene and other legal requirements and our staff are carefully selected and properly trained. Our goal is to serve wholesome and tasty food which is fresh, seasonal and sourced locally wherever possible.

We use pasteurised eggs in any food which will either not be cooked or only lightly cooked (examples include home made mayonnaise, béarnaise, hollandaise, salad dressings, ice cream, icing, mousse and tiramisu).

Under the NT Food Policy, the National Trust (Enterprises) insists that all chicken and fresh eggs used in our catering outlets are sourced from the United Kingdom and are produced to high standards of animal welfare, as assured by either Freedom Foods or Organic certification.

Q13 What will the National Trust do now that the disease has been identified in the UK?

The National Trust is monitoring the situation closely and has developed contingency plans for different scenarios. We will take all necessary advice from DEFRA / DARD (Northern Ireland) as appropriate.

Clearly, the safety of visitors at our properties, our staff and volunteers, and indeed the wildlife, are of the utmost importance to the National Trust.

We are constantly reviewing and checking our procedures and would act immediately if new information gave us cause for concern.

Q14 What would happen if avian flu was confirmed in a bird or birds on National Trust land?

We would comply with DEFRA's, or in Northern Ireland DARD's, requirements. In order to minimise the risk to public health this might mean some properties being temporarily closed while the disease is dealt with, pending advice from DEFRA / DARD.

All media enquiries to:

Julian Lloyd, Head of Media, 07768 700976
Mike Collins, Senior Press Officer, 01793 817708 or 07900 138419

Further information:

http://intranet/intranet/i-index/i-int-avian_influenza.htm
<http://www.wwt.org.uk>
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/latest/2007/animal-0203.htm>
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/disease/ai/index.htm>
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/latest/2006/animal-0314.htm>
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/diseases/aiavoid.pdf>
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/diseases/aisuspected.pdf>
http://www.who.int/csr/don/2005_08_18/en/index.html
http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/pub_metadata/field_manual/chapter_22.pdf
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/>

Help lines:

For reporting unusual wild bird mortality events
DEFRA (England, Wales and Scotland): 08459 335577
DARD (Northern Ireland): 02890 524999