

Bird Flu Basics

Contributed by Downsizers

Beware the media hype.

This is a simple Q&A that will help you understand the facts and prepare for Bird Flu.

This article will be updated as new information emerges.

What is Bird Flu?

Bird flu (also called avian influenza) is a disease caused by a virus. Diseases caused by viruses are common amongst plants and animals, some are extremely dangerous (e.g. smallpox), others are niggly and unpleasant (e.g. cold sores) and some are just inconvenient (e.g. common cold). Flu, or influenza, is somewhere between the unpleasant and the dangerous.

Is Bird Flu dangerous?

To people, no. But to chickens, it's deadly. And quick, too.

Isn't it true it's killed people?

It has. Maybe a couple of hundred in the whole wide world in three years or so.

Isn't that dangerous?

That's out of millions and millions of people. In over three years. Let's put it in proportion.

In the same time about ten *thousand* people have been killed on British roads.

Couple of hundred worldwide against ten thousand in just the UK.

Which sounds more dangerous to you?

Well OK, but are you saying Chicken, Turkey, Game Birds, Eggs and things like that are safe?

Just as safe as they were a year ago. Cook the food, as normal, and even if somehow it had the disease, none of it would survive the cooking. And in the UK and Europe there's no real chance you'd ever get an infected bird anyway. So as long as the stuff is cooked, it's safe.

Then how did the people that died catch it? Couldn't I get it just as easily?

Do you work all day in third world chickenhouses? Even if you did, it'd still be really hard to catch it. You need to breath in an awful lot of dust from the droppings of infected chickens. Oh, or drink the blood of an infected duck - raw! It is really very hard for people to catch this. It's a bird disease.

Why's that?

Because the disease that kills chickens so efficiently simply doesn't 'work' properly in people. For now.

So that could change?

Might well, but that'd be like a whole new disease, still the same H5N1 general type, but different inside, and the new disease would have to spread around the world all over again.

Spread by birds and chickens?

Well, if it became a people disease, it'd be spread by people. Just like ordinary flu. And jets spread diseases around the world much faster than swans migrate.

And that'd be serious, would it?

Who knows? If you do manage to catch the bird version, it can be pretty serious. So there's the possibility of a nasty human disease appearing some time in the future, probably in China.

China?

In the poorest parts, people, pigs and chickens live pretty much together. That's a great way to develop a version of an animal disease that can 'cross-over' to humans. All flu seems to have come from birds originally. Most really new types of human flu appear first in China.

That's still to come then?

Might never happen. Might happen this year, or next. Or sometime. People can have more or less well-informed opinions, but nobody can know for sure.

Well if that's for the future, what's happening now?

It's bad news for free range and organic chickens...

Free range and organic - thats what I look for! What's happening?

Well as you know, free range birds are happier and healthier than those penned up inside battery farms. And the eggs and meat are better too. But there's a problem. If they're outside, they could come into contact with an infected wild bird. Or more dangerously, its droppings.

Are you saying wild bird droppings are dangerous?

Well, I wouldn't like the idea of my kid playing in poo, and that's flu or no flu!
But there's precious little bird flu risk to people from those droppings. Unless you intend snorting them like cocaine. Which is a bad idea anyway.

So are droppings dangerous to poultry?

If they are from an infected bird, yes, very dangerous to poultry. And for weeks after they were dropped, they are still infectious to chickens.

So poultry have got to be kept away from wild bird droppings?

Precisely! That's why the Government is able to order birds to be kept 'under cover' anywhere near a reported outbreak.

Isn't that to minimise the risk to people from the chickens?

There isn't any real risk from the chickens. Its the risk to the poor old chickens that's the reason for keeping them in. It is important that we keep track of where the disease is and try to contain it, but that doesn't mean that all of the local seagulls are any more dangerous than they already were. Nor anyone's back-garden or farmyard poultry.

Keeping them in? Is that what you meant by "under cover"?

Well, DEFRA (the ministry) have set out specifications. Minimum requirement is a wire mesh run - mesh over the top - completely enclosed, with the food and water being kept protected from contamination from wild bird droppings.

Wouldn't even that be expensive if you had a lot of birds and wanted to give them plenty of space?

Oh yes! And if people get un-necessarily scared about eating the produce, its extra expenditure when income is falling. Not a good time to be a chicken farmer.

So how long are they going to be 'cooped up' for?

Good question! "Until the risk to the birds has passed" is something like the official line. And if the disease gets into native wild birds and gets established here, well, one of the Government's advisors was talking about years.

That's not nice for the birds, is it?

No. And not good for you either, if you prefer free range produce.

So can't they be vaccinated? Is there a problem with developing a vaccine?

Ah! For the bird disease, there are bird vaccines. The Government doesn't think they are good enough yet, and that if flocks were vaccinated, it'd be harder to tell how much disease was really around.

Isn't there a problem with a human vaccine?

Yes! You can't develop and manufacture a stockpile of vaccine against a variety of flu virus that doesn't exist yet. Until there is a virus version that actually threatens people, there's a limit to how much vaccine development you can do.

But if there's no version of this thing that threatens people yet, why is there so much excitement over it?

Good question! Partly its probably sensationalist journalism. Partly its because a future version of this virus, that had evolved so that it 'worked' in humans could be nasty...

How nasty?

No one knows is the truthful answer. But almost certainly rather worse than ordinary winter flu.

Why worse?

The form of H5N1 virus currently doing the rounds has some features that haven't shown up before, and a larger proportion of people affected by this virus (more than half) have died than would be the case from most other forms of flu virus. Add to that, when faced with a novel threat, the body's immune system risks going into overdrive. Not nice. But also a great journalistic scare story. Think back to the press reports of the Y2K computer problem. Did the journalists understand it? Did that stop them reporting that the End of the World was Nigh? It was a "good story" for journalists, and so is "Bird Flu".

Should I be worried?

There's lots of things in the future to be worried about. Global warming looks to be a much bigger threat to mankind than influenza. But for now, you should only be really worried about bird flu if you are a poultry keeper, especially of free range birds. And then don't worry about your own or your family's risk of catching this bird disease, but worry rather about the real risk to your flock, and to your business - even if your flock are protected from all contact with the disease. Of course

if the disease turns into an epidemic your flock may be culled as part of a DEFRA initiative regardless of your own biosecurity measures.

I've got a few chickens in my garden, should I do anything?

Unless you've got a bird flu outbreak close by, then as yet you don't need to worry so much. If an outbreak of H5N1 does occur, then you'll be legally required to get your chickens indoors for a period of time; investing in an enclosure of some kind, with sides and a protective top cover, may be a prudent precaution.

[Click here for DEFRA's extensive advice](#) including how to separate your birds from wild ones.

I've heard about flock 'registration'. Does that apply to me?

If you have more than 50 birds for commercial purposes then yes, it does. You are legally required to register your flock with DEFRA.

However, even if you have a smaller flock or you're a 'back yard' poultry keeper, the British Veterinary Association recommends that you should register.

[Click here for information on registering your flock](#)

How can I tell if my chickens have bird flu?

It could easily be that the first you knew of it was that many of them were dead. Chickens can die of this disease in only a few hours. Before that, some birds might not show any obvious symptoms, but the first signs of influenza infection would be expected to include:

- Loss of egg laying (so there's little risk of getting an egg from an infected bird)
- Some swelling and/or discolouration at the combs and wattles
- General lethargy and ruffled feathers

Later symptoms include:

- Weakness
- Internal haemorrhaging and diarrhoea
- Paralysis and death within hours

If your chickens have flu, you'll know. There'll be a lot of very poorly birds, not just the odd one, and it would be very quick to develop.

There's more detailed info on DEFRA and other sites (see the links section below).

But sometimes, the disease is completely asymptomatic; you just don't see whether they have it or not. And remember, birds can die from all kinds of things, including natural causes. If bird flu were suspected, a lab test would need to be carried out to confirm the cause of death. But at the moment there is no reason to panic. Just be vigilant with your livestock, keep a close eye on them, and look out for any changes in their behaviour.

Could my pet bird, cat or dog catch this disease from wild birds?

Your pet bird could catch the disease if it has direct contact with an infected wild bird, so keep an eye on it and keep it indoors for the moment. Most vets agree that a cat or a dog could catch it from a wild bird, but it's very unlikely, and your pet would probably have to be quite unwell already to catch it.

If there were an outbreak of H5N1 near you, you might be requested or required to keep your cat indoors as a precaution.

What do I do if I find a dead wild bird?

Birds die, and most of them don't die of bird flu. If it's a large water bird (swan, duck, goose, etc.) or three or more dead wild birds close together, call the DEFRA helpline on: 08459 335 577

And it's a good idea not to go handling dead animals you find lying around, whether they have bird flu or not. If you do, follow the DEFRA guidelines ([click here to view](#))

[Links / Information \(Click on titles\)](#)

[Downsizer's Bird Flu For Beginners](#)

[BBC Question and Answer Page](#)

Information for pet owners:

- [PDSA](#)
- [DEFRA](#)
- [RSPCA](#)

BLUECROSS
RSPB
BVA
BBC

Scottish Sites:

avian flu FAQs - general

avian flu contingency planning FAQs (Scotland)

preventative measures FAQs