

Bird flu cases on the rise in Illinois (Print)

The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) has reported the state's first bird flu cases in poultry flocks.

In a health advisory sent to long-term care (LTC) facilities, farm bureaus and local health departments, the IDPH reports large commercial poultry flocks in central and southern Illinois have recently tested positive for the H5N1 virus. Farm owners are now in the process of "de-populating" the birds.

Several counties in northern Illinois have reported events where many ducks and geese have died, referred to as "die-offs." The reason LTCs received the notice is because many are located on retention ponds that attract waterfowl and wild birds.

No human cases have been reported in Illinois yet. But health officials continue to warn those who interact with potentially infected animals that if they don't wear the proper personal protective equipment (PPE), they are at higher risk of developing the novel influenza A virus due to H5N1.

Doug Kasper, MD, an infectious disease specialist with OSF HealthCare, says bird flu has really hurt local American farms.

"Avian flu is a different strain of Influenza A. It's a strain that has been circulating in bird and cattle populations for over two years. It has been devastating to those populations, like poultry and dairy farms across the country," Dr. Kasper says. "What was unique was that in the calendar year 2024, was the first confirmed testing where the spread from an animal to a human occurred of this specific strain of influenza."

In early January, the Louisiana Department of Health [reported](#) the first-ever human bird flu death in the United States. The patient was reported to be over 65 years of age and had underlying medical conditions. The patient contracted H5N1 after exposure to sick and dead birds in a backyard flock.

Currently bird flu is only transmitted from animal to animal or animal to person. There have been no reported cases to have transmitted from human to human, but Dr. Kasper says there is always a concern about that possibility.

"Whenever there is an animal strain of infection that's not typically found in humans, we worry about the impact of if it were to cross over," Dr. Kasper says. "We've seen this with other infections throughout history. Even within COVID-19, there was the initial thought that it was an animal strain of infection."

The current flu vaccine does not protect against avian influenza, Dr. Kasper says.

"Each year the influenza vaccine, which is made up of three or four strains of influenza virus, is reexamined and matched up to a variety of factors to try and predict which strains will be most prevalent the next year," Dr. Kasper says. "Right now, avian flu cases in humans are so low that it doesn't warrant a different strain that would be much more likely to be found."

IDPH's guidance to LTCs is to have residents tested for the flu if they are suspected of having acute respiratory illness. Don't touch dead or sick birds, only trained staff in appropriate PPE should handle with caution.

"The average person who does not interact with poultry or dairy farms is at very low risk of avian flu," Dr. Kasper says.

There is concern that bird flu could enter the food production and distribution across America. This is why the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is closely monitoring dairy and poultry farms, to try and limit any possible contamination of dairy, meat or poultry products.

The bird flu continues to be rarely seen in humans, as only 67 cases (as of January 15) have been [reported](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Most cases have been mild, Dr. Kasper says.