

Don't let bird flu ruffle your feathers
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A multi-state outbreak of avian influenza (bird flu), also known as H5N1, has caused the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) to closely monitor the situation.

The virus starts with wild birds. Then, it can spread to poultry, cows or cats. How does it reach humans? Through close contact with poultry or cows. [It can be passed on](#) through direct physical contact, after someone touches the virus and then touches their eyes, nose or mouth. It can also spread through contaminated surfaces. Lastly, bird flu can spread in the air through droplets or dust. The virus can enter through the eyes, nose or mouth, go through the nasal passage and into the lungs.

"The particular strain is H5N1, which has been talked about as far back as 2009 as being a particular concern of influenza, is circulating in animal populations and has crossed over to a very small number of people. Largely those who work very closely with animals," says Doug Kasper, MD, an infectious disease specialist with OSF HealthCare.

Before news alerts surrounding bird flu begin to ruffle your feathers, Dr. Kasper says the crossover to humans has been extremely low.

"This isn't something that's going to catch us by surprise. The cases that have occurred and found their way to humans have been relatively mild and have not progressed into the family units of those people. The cases have not led to any sustained change in how we usually identify or treat influenza," Dr. Kasper says.

H5N1 infections in dairy herds have been found in 12 states including Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Texas and Wyoming. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) says it's working closely with state animal officials when it comes to cleaning and disinfecting on affected farms. Colorado, Texas and Michigan are the only states where humans have become infected.

Dr. Kasper says the current flu vaccine does not protect against the bird flu.

"While this is not a strain that is readily seen in our population yet, it is something that's on the CDC's monitoring list. It is something that may require additional adjustment in our flu vaccine strategy," Dr. Kasper says. "For now, the guidance remains that when the seasonal flu vaccine becomes available, people 6 months of age or older should receive it."

Farmers or producers who have been impacted by the spread of bird flu can apply for financial assistance through the USDA's [Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program \(ELAP\)](#).

The [CDC reports](#) more than 4,300 people have been monitored due to exposure to infected animals, while only 13 cases have been confirmed in humans since March 24, 2024. The current public health risk remains low.