

Safety Note 37

3rd Edition, 27/05/2021

AVIAN AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

Summary			
This Safety Note summarises the facts about Avian and Pandemic Flu, precautions to take and further information sources.			
Scope			
This Safety Note provides advice and guidance on the precautions you should take to help protect yourself from bird flu and on general good hygiene practices that will help to avoid the spread of other flu viruses (including both pandemic flu and other more common seasonal flu viruses).			
Document Control			
Document type (CoP / SN)		SN	
Document owner		Wendy Manning (H&S Auditor / Adviser)	
Document status (Draft / Final)		DRAFT	
Version		3	
Approved by		Chair of UHSWC 27/05/2021	
Checked for accessibility	Yes	Date	27/05/2021
Date of publication		Next review date	26/05/2024
Date of original publication	01/08/2006	Revision frequency	3 yearly
Superseded documents		N/A	
Related documents		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code of Practice 38 Overseas Travel • Code of Practice 32 Fieldwork 	

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SUMMARY

This Safety Note provides information on the precautions you should take to help protect yourself from bird flu and on general good hygiene practices that will help to avoid the spread of other flu viruses (including both pandemic flu and other more common seasonal flu viruses).

The University of Reading has considered its response to the possibility of a flu pandemic (worldwide flu epidemic), which might develop from an outbreak of avian (bird) flu. The University’s planning draws upon the best available scientific and government advice and its experience in dealing with outbreaks of other infectious disease.

Avian influenza (bird flu) mainly affects birds but it can also affect humans and other mammals and is a notifiable animal disease. The risks to humans from **avian flu** are low, but it is possible an outbreak in birds could at some point develop into a **human flu pandemic** which would be much more serious. In saying this, it is important not to over-react and to realise that avian flu may not lead to pandemic flu.

This Safety Note provides information on the precautions you should take to help protect yourself from bird flu and on general good hygiene practices that will help to avoid the spread of other flu viruses (including both pandemic flu and other more common seasonal flu viruses).

AVIAN INFLUENZA (BIRD FLU) – THE FACTS

- Avian influenza is a type of flu that mainly affects wild and domestic birds. It can spread rapidly between birds causing sickness and death, especially in poultry farms or live bird markets where birds are kept close together. Infected birds shed flu virus in their saliva, nasal fluids and droppings, spreading it to their feathers.
- A serious form of bird flu (caused by the H5N1 virus) has affected poultry (particularly chickens and ducks and some wild birds) in parts of Asia and Europe (see: www.who.int for list of affected areas).
- In the recent past, the H5N1 virus has spread to humans and caused serious illness in a small number of local people who have had close contact with infected birds. About half of these people have died. No human cases have occurred in the UK.
- Bird flu is spread to humans by close contact with an infected bird (dead or alive). This includes touching infected birds, touching droppings or bedding and killing and preparing infected poultry for cooking. You cannot catch bird flu through eating fully cooked poultry or eggs, even in areas with an outbreak of bird flu.
- There are lots of different strains of bird flu virus. Most of them don't infect humans. But there are 4 strains that have caused concern in recent years:-
 - H5N1 (since 1997)
 - H7N9 (since 2013)
 - H5N6 (since 2014)
 - H5N8 (since 2016)

Although H5N1, H7N9 and H5N6 don't infect people easily and aren't usually spread from human to human, several people have been infected around the world, leading to a number of deaths. H5N8 has infected poultry workers in Russia but Public Health England (PHE) have assessed that the risk of the H5N8 strain to the UK population is low. PHE also advises that the risk to the public's health from the other 3 strains found in the UK during 2020/21 (H5N2, H5N1, H5N5 and H5N3) is very low.

- When avian influenza is confirmed or suspected in poultry or other captive birds, disease control zones are put in place around the affected premises. To check [Higher risk areas \(HRA's\)](#) or where disease control zones are currently located see the Animal and Plant Health Agency's (APHA) [interactive disease map](#).
- An Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) came into force across the whole of England (declared on 11th November 2020 and requires enhanced biosecurity). However AIPZ housing restrictions ended on 31/03/21. For further details see the [AIPZ guidance](#).
- So far, there is no confirmed evidence of this virus spreading from one person to another.
- Even if you come into close contact with infected birds, dead or alive, the risk of catching bird flu remains extremely low.
- Travellers should be aware of the risk and follow the advice given in this Safety Note.

TRAVELLING TO AN AFFECTED AREA

The risk of avian flu to staff or students visiting countries affected by avian flu is believed to be very low. There is no reason not to travel to these countries. But all those visiting or living in countries affected by avian flu should follow sensible precautions.

If you are visiting countries with reported outbreaks of H5N1 bird flu among poultry, you should observe the following measures:

Before travel

Check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Travel Advice web site for any travel restrictions.

What you can do to prevent Avian Flu

- Avoid close contact with live or dead poultry.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water.
- Use different utensils for cooked and raw meat.
- Avoid going to live animal markets or poultry farms

What not to do:

- do not go near or touch bird droppings or sick or dead birds
- do not bring any live birds or poultry back to the UK, including feathers
- do not eat undercooked or raw poultry, poultry products (including blood) or duck
- do not eat raw eggs

Contact with live or dead poultry

If you have been in contact with live or dead poultry in an affected country be aware of the symptoms of bird flu in humans. They are similar to ordinary flu symptoms and can appear suddenly. They may include:

- a very high temperature or feeling hot or shivery
- aching muscles
- headache
- a cough

Other early symptoms may include:

- diarrhoea
- sickness
- stomach pain
- chest pain
- bleeding from the nose and gums
- conjunctivitis

Advice for staff members who develop flu-like symptoms whilst abroad

If you are a staff member and have these symptoms whilst abroad, and if you have been in close contact with live or dead poultry, you should seek medical advice locally on whether or not to return to the UK or to the University. You may also phone the University's Occupational Health Service on +44 118 3227629 or 3228415. You must not return to the University until you have discussed your symptoms with Occupational Health.

Advice for students who develop flu-like symptoms whilst abroad

If you are a University of Reading student and have these symptoms whilst abroad, and if you have been in close contact with live or dead poultry, you should seek medical advice locally on whether or not to return to the UK or to the University. If you are registered with the University Medical Practice, you may also phone them on +44 118 987 4551. You must not return to the University until you have sought medical advice from the University Medical Practice or other doctor, either in the UK or overseas.

For further travel advice consult the National Travel Health Network Centre (NaTHNaC) www.nathnac.org and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office>

RETURNING FROM AN AFFECTED AREA

If you develop the above symptoms within seven days of leaving an affected country and you had close contact with live or dead poultry, it is very important that you:

- Seek immediate medical attention.
- Contact your doctor (GP or University Medical Practice) or telephone NHS Direct on 0845 4647, stating your symptoms and recent travel history.
- Follow the advice that they give you.
- If you are a member of staff, do not visit the University, but contact the University Occupational Health Service and seek advice on whether or not you should report for work. Then contact your manager/supervisor to advise them of the situation.
- If you are a student, contact a close friend or tutor (preferably by telephone), informing them that you are ill and that it is possible that you may have avian 'flu. Stay in your room and do not mix with other students until a doctor has assessed your condition.

GOOD HYGIENE PRACTICES

You can reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of catching or spreading any form of 'flu by:

- Covering your nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing, using a tissue where possible.
- Using tissues only once when coughing or sneezing and disposing of them promptly and carefully in a waste bin (preferably bagged).
- Washing your hands frequently with soap and water to reduce the spread of the virus from your hands to your face, or to other people.
- Avoiding touching surfaces (such as door handles) and then the face.
- Avoiding non-essential travel and large crowds whenever possible.
- Cleaning hard surfaces (e.g., kitchen worktops, door handles) frequently, using a normal cleaning product.
- Making sure children follow this advice.

Treatment

Most people with the flu need no special treatment. Influenza is caused by a virus so antibiotics do not help unless there is a complication. Occasionally an 'antiviral' medicine such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) or zanamivir (Relenza) will be given.

You will be advised to stay at home while feeling ill with influenza or you'll be cared for in hospital in isolation from other patients. You should rest and drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration. You can take over the counter medications as you would with a cold or flu generally to relieve the symptoms (following the instructions).

Vaccination against bird flu

There is no human vaccine available for bird flu. The annual flu vaccine won't protect you specifically from bird flu, but it may help reduce the risk of simultaneous infection with bird and human flu viruses.

WILD BIRDS ON THE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

Wild birds live on the University campuses, in particular in the vicinity of the Whiteknights lake and on University farmland. Anyone finding 3 or more dead waterfowl (swans, geese and ducks) or a group of 5 or more dead birds of other species on the University campus should telephone the **University of Reading Security Services on Tel. 0118 378 6300**.

Government advice is not to touch any dead birds. If you do accidentally touch a dead bird, wash your hands with soap and water as soon as possible. Avoid touching your face and do not eat until you have washed your hands. Clean any soiling on clothing with soap and water. More information is available on the Defra web site at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/>

FUTURE INFORMATION ON BIRD FLU

The University is making sure that we have adequate channels of communication available to inform the whole University community about avian 'flu. We are also ensuring that our business continuity plan is fit for purpose.

As and when the situation changes, further information about bird flu, and the University's response to any local outbreaks, will be published on the Health and Safety Services web site. Other communication methods will include the University News for staff pages on the staff portal, via all user email communications, the Student's Union and the University of Reading Student web site and School, departmental and Halls noticeboards where appropriate.

The information in this Safety Note is based on the following sources of government advice:

- NHS <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bird-flu/>
- Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Animal and Plant Health Agency <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/avian-influenza-bird-flu>
- Further details of the new requirements that apply as part of the Avian Influenza Prevention Zone can be found [here](#).
- The government's outbreak assessment following recent cases in England can be accessed [here](#).
- See Public Health England's website for more information on [avian influenza](#)

Related health and safety publications:

- [Code of Practice 38 Overseas Travel](#)
- [Code of Practice 32 Fieldwork](#)