

## Avian influenza A(H5N1)

Avian influenza is caused by highly pathogenic avian influenza virus A(H5N1).

The highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) virus, which occurs in wild birds and poultry in Europe, does not pose a serious risk to humans. However, caution should be exercised in the event of contact with infected wild birds and poultry.

### **What is avian influenza virus A(H5N1) and is it dangerous to humans?**

It is classified as a highly pathogenic avian influenza virus and has long been detected in wild birds and poultry. It causes deaths in some wild birds and domestic poultry. When infected, it can kill more than 80% of the poultry in a holding and is therefore called highly pathogenic.

**The variant of avian influenza virus A(H5N1) occurring in Europe does not pose a serious threat to human health.** Despite the large number of sick and dead wild birds and poultry, an extremely low number of transmissions to persons in very close contact with poultry have been detected.

But caution is still required. Influenza viruses are viruses that are constantly and intensively changing and adapting to different hosts by exchanging genetic material. This creates new strains of influenza viruses that can acquire the ability to infect humans. It is this variability and adaptability that underlies the recommendation to avoid contact with diseased or dead wild birds and infected poultry, despite the near absence of proven human infections.

### **Can we get infected by consuming poultry or eggs?**

Healthy animals and eggs from healthy farms are suitable for human consumption. Administration for Food Safety, Veterinary Sector and Plant Protection will immediately ban the sale of poultry and eggs if it suspects that highly pathogenic influenza A(H5N1) virus has been detected in farmed poultry.

Adequately cooked poultry and eggs do not pose a risk of infection with highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) virus. It should be noted that poultry meat should always be well cooked, not because of avian influenza, but because of the possibility of poultry meat contaminated with salmonella or campylobacter.

### **What are the measures to limit transmission to poultry and birds in captivity?**

Administration for Food Safety, Veterinary Sector and Plant Protection recommends that contact between poultry and captive birds and wild birds should be limited, especially in areas where the virus is known to occur.

### **How do we protect ourselves?**

If we come across a dead bird (especially aquatic birds or birds of prey) while walking or working in nature, we should not touch, pick up or otherwise handle it. We call the competent authorities at the regional office of the Administration for Food Safety, Veterinary Sector and Plant Protection (or 112),

who will safely remove the dead bird. It is important to inform them whenever a major wild bird death is observed.

We safely dispose of dead sparrows and other small songbirds found in our gardens, balconies, terraces, etc. How do we do it? By putting a plastic or rubber glove on our hand and placing the dead bird in a plastic bag, which we dispose of together with the glove as general waste. If we do not have suitable gloves to dispose of after use, we put a plastic bag on our hand, pick up the bird and throw it in the rubbish with the plastic bag. We wash our hands thoroughly with soap and warm water.

Persons directly exposed to sick and dead birds at work, i.e. those involved in the removal of sick and dead birds and poultry, veterinarians and veterinary technicians are advised to use the prescribed personal protective equipment. More detailed instructions are available on the Administration for Food Safety, Veterinary Sector and Plant Protection website. Persons in contact with poultry (breeders, employees of poultry farms) are recommended to be vaccinated against seasonal influenza every year.

### **What to do if we have been in close contact with a bird that may have been infected with avian influenza A(H5N1) virus?**

Close contact with a potentially infected wild bird means touching a sick or dead wild bird or its excreta without protection (i.e. without gloves). Although it is unlikely that we have harmed our own health despite close contact, we advise that after close contact without protection, we continue to observe our health for 10 days.

If health problems arise, especially symptoms of a respiratory infection, we should consult our chosen personal doctor. Avian influenza viruses are transmitted by migratory birds in autumn and winter. The peak season for influenza and other acute respiratory infections in humans occurs at the same time. **It is therefore much more likely that, despite close contact with a sick/dead wild bird, we are suffering from the common cold, a virus, seasonal influenza or COVID-19, rather than from avian influenza.**

Humans can be "passive" carriers of the avian influenza A(H5N1) virus. What does this mean? When we come into close contact with an infected wild bird, we get the virus on our clothes, shoes, boots (e.g. by walking on the droppings of a sick bird). The virus can be introduced into poultry farms through contaminated clothing and especially footwear. We therefore reiterate that contact with sick and dead wild birds should be avoided, and this is particularly important for poultry farmers.