

Avian influenza - information for contacts

This factsheet is for anyone who may have been exposed to [avian influenza](#) from birds, animals, wildlife or their contaminated environments. Take the appropriate precautions below and closely monitor your health.

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza, or bird flu, is caused by influenza A viruses, similar to those causing human flu. It spreads mainly among wild water birds but can occasionally infect humans. It affects birds differently, ranging from mild sickness to death. Migration of wild birds can bring avian influenza into Australia.

Avian influenza outbreaks are serious because potential virus mutations (changes) can threaten poultry, livestock, wildlife and humans. Australia has had a number of small outbreaks of avian influenza strains on poultry* farms and a small number of mild human infections have occurred in people who had exposure to sick poultry.

** Poultry refers to domesticated birds that are kept for meat, egg laying, for their feathers or as pets. This includes chickens, turkeys and other types of birds.*

How can I monitor myself, poultry workers or other contacts?

If you have been in close contact with infected poultry, wild birds, livestock, wildlife, their secretions, their contaminated environments and/or people infected with avian influenza, you should carefully monitor your health for 10 days after last contact.

If you remain well, you will usually not be asked to isolate. Your local public health unit may contact you to check in on how you are going.

[Monitoring yourself](#) involves watching out for any new symptoms, particularly the following:

- fever over 38°C (check your temperature daily), chills or shakes
- respiratory issues (sore throat, cough, difficulty breathing)
- extreme tiredness or collapse due to exhaustion
- headache, neck stiffness, and muscle or joint aches
- nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea;
- red, sore eyes (conjunctivitis)

If symptoms appear:

- **Contact** your doctor and mention possible avian flu exposure
- **Isolate** yourself from others as much as possible until seen by a doctor
- **Practice good hygiene:** Cover your mouth when coughing/sneezing, wash your hands often, dispose of used tissues properly and wear a mask if you cannot isolate from other people.
- **Report your illness** to your local Public Health Unit (**1300 066 055**).

In a medical emergency always seek immediate health care or phone 000. Tell ambulance or hospital staff that you may have been in contact with avian influenza.

What treatment is provided if I am exposed to avian influenza?

Antiviral medicines for seasonal influenza (flu) such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) can prevent severe illness from avian influenza. Your doctor will provide treatment and advice, based on your needs.

How does avian influenza infection occur?

Infection occurs from contact with infected poultry, wild birds or other animals, or environments (surfaces) contaminated with the saliva or faeces (poo) of infected animals.

Infection also occurs by inhaling dust from dried faeces, accidentally rubbing contaminated dust in your eyes, or preparing infected poultry (slaughter, defeathering, and butchering).

People cannot be infected with avian influenza by eating well-cooked or pasteurised products from infected birds and animals, such as meat or eggs.

If infected, antiviral medications such as oseltamivir can prevent severe illness. Antibiotics may be needed for secondary bacterial infections such as pneumonia.

Does avian influenza spread easily from poultry to people?

No. Avian influenza in people is very rare.

People might be at increased risk of the disease if there is a change in the virus or if they are exposed to large amounts of the virus.

Is there a vaccine for avian influenza?

There is no specific vaccine for avian influenza however the seasonal [influenza \(flu\) vaccination](#) can help prevent you from becoming infected with multiple strains of influenza at the same time. Seasonal flu vaccination can also provide some protection against virus mixing which occurs when a person is infected with more than one virus. Virus mixing can produce a new, highly infectious influenza viruses and could be a serious threat to the wider community.

Vaccination is recommended for:

- People who may be exposed to poultry infected with avian influenza as part of their work. Ideally, the flu vaccine should be given at least 14 days before exposure.
- People who have had direct contact with poultry infected with avian influenza.
- People for whom flu vaccination is recommended by the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) irrespective of their exposure to birds.

How can avian influenza be prevented?

If you work with poultry, your workplace will have infection control procedures that you must follow. You can also protect yourself by wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) including:

- disposable gloves (not vinyl)
 - fluid-resistant overalls or fluid-resistant disposable coveralls
 - disposable shoes or shoe covers, or gumboots that can be cleaned and allocated for use while working with poultry or environments with poultry
 - respiratory protection (P2/N95 respiratory mask)
 - eye protection (goggles or face shield).
- Seek expert advice and instruction on the correct use and safe disposal of PPE, and general infection control. Make sure PPE is either safely disposed of or cleaned properly after use.
 - Wash hands with soap and water before and after handling animals or touching surfaces contaminated by poultry secretions (faeces, respiratory secretions or saliva or contaminated products, such as litter), and after removing or handling PPE.
 - Make sure people involved in an outbreak response have received the current flu vaccine.
 - Discourage anyone who is unwell, particularly people suspected of being unwell with the flu (e.g. fever, cough, tiredness, muscle aches, sore throat, shortness of breath, runny nose, or headache), from entering a poultry house, processing facility or an area being used for investigation.
 - Ensure poultry and poultry products are cooked thoroughly before eating, and wash kitchen and cooking utensils after handling raw poultry.

Always use PPE to reduce the risk of infection, even if the chance of becoming infected is low. People working in or visiting a place with infected poultry must take actions to protect themselves and others.

Additional resources

For further advice, see:

- NSW Health [Avian influenza fact sheet](#)
- NSW [Advice for people under surveillance](#)
- NSW [Department of Primary Industries - Avian influenza](#)
- World Health Organization (WHO) - [Avian influenza Fact sheet](#)