

Avian Influenza

Avian influenza, sometimes called bird flu, is a viral infection that mainly affects birds, although it can 'spill over' to mammals.

There are different types of avian influenza viruses—they do not spread easily from animals to humans, or between humans. Avian influenza generally only spreads to people who have had a lot of close unprotected contact with infected birds or other infected animals.

There has never been a case of avian influenza in humans reported in Aotearoa New Zealand. In other countries where avian influenza is present, human infection has generally only been found in people who have had a lot of contact with infected birds or other infected animals. Currently, the risk of human infection is low in Aotearoa.



How does avian influenza infect people?

Avian influenza can be spread from infected birds or other animals to people through close unprotected contact (such as not using personal protective equipment like gloves, a face mask and eye protection when dealing with these animals). Infected birds can spread the virus through their saliva, mucus and droppings. Other infected animals can also spread the virus through other body fluids (including their milk).

People can become infected when they touch something contaminated by the virus and they then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth, or when the virus is in the air (in droplets, small particles, or possibly dust) and is breathed in.

People with avian influenza do not easily spread the virus to other people. In rare cases when this has happened, it was due to very close and prolonged contact with a sick person.



What are the symptoms of avian influenza?

Avian influenza can cause a range of symptoms and vary in severity. People with avian influenza may experience no symptoms or mild illness (similar to seasonal flu). However, avian influenza can also cause severe illness and death. Symptoms of avian influenza include:

- a high temperature (more than 38°C) or feeling hot and shivery
- conjunctivitis (eye or eyelid redness and swelling)
- a cough
- sore throat
- aching muscles or joints
- headache
- shortness of breath
- diarrhoea
- stomach pain
- chest pain.



People at higher risk

People who have prolonged, unprotected contact with sick or dead birds, other animals with avian influenza, and their environments or bodily fluids are at highest risk of becoming infected.



What should I do if I have symptoms of avian influenza?

If you or someone you live with has had recent close contact with sick birds or other animals and has symptoms of avian influenza, please seek medical help. Contact your GP, doctor or hauora/healthcare provider for advice. You can also call Healthline on **0800 611 116**, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information. **In an emergency call 111.**

Your healthcare provider may take a throat, nose and/or eye swab to test for infection if you have recently been exposed to infected animals or humans and have symptoms of avian influenza.



What if I get avian influenza?

If you get avian influenza, your local public health service will contact you or your whānau to provide you with guidance and support. Antiviral treatment medicine may be offered to you to reduce the amount of virus in your body so you do not get as sick. Some people who get avian influenza become seriously unwell and need hospital care.

If you have avian influenza and are not in hospital, you should isolate (stay home and away from others) during the time when you are at risk of spreading the infection to others. This is normally until 7 days after your symptoms first started or if you're still unwell after that time, until your major symptoms are gone, and you are feeling better. Your local public health service will discuss this with you and check in on you daily during this time.



What if public health tell me I am an exposed person or a contact?

An **exposed person** is someone who has had close contact with any animal, animal matter or bodily fluids, or a contaminated environment that is confirmed or highly suspected to be infected with avian influenza.

A **contact** is someone who has had face-to-face or physical contact with a person who is confirmed to have avian influenza, their body fluids or their laboratory samples during the time this person was infectious.

Both exposed people and contacts may be at a higher risk of getting avian influenza. Your local public health service will identify if you are in one of these groups at higher risk, assess your risk of infection, and contact you to provide guidance and support. You might need to:

- **Complete a course of antiviral medicine:** You may be offered this depending on the strain of the virus you have come into contact with, and your risk of infection. If the strain hasn't infected humans before, or your risk is low, antivirals will not usually be recommended.

- **Avoid high-risk places and people:** For some virus strains or higher-risk situations, you may be asked to stay away from:
 - farms, animal shows, or similar locations
 - healthcare settings
 - large gatherings
 - people at higher risk of severe illness if they were to get the virus, such as immunosuppressed, pregnant, young children and the very old.
- If you are an exposed person or a contact, and develop symptoms:
 - isolate (stay at home and away) from others as soon as possible
 - contact your local public health service immediately for further advice. Contact information is here: healthnz.govt.nz/national-public-health-service



How can avian influenza be prevented?

Avoid close contact with sick or dead birds or other animals. If you need to touch a sick wild bird, follow the steps outlined here: healthnz.govt.nz/avian-influenza

If you are going tramping, camping, hunting, walking dogs near bird colonies, or anywhere where you may be exposed to wild birds or marine mammals, you are recommended to do the following.

- If you see 3 or more sick or dead wild birds in a group, report it immediately to Biosecurity New Zealand's Exotic Pest and Disease Hotline on **0800 80 99 66**.
- If you find any **sick** or dead wild birds, avoid contact with them or their body fluids. Do not allow tamariki (children), dogs or other animals to go near or handle them.
- Wash your hands either with soap and running water, or use alcohol-based hand sanitiser often and thoroughly—especially before and after contact with animals and their environment.

If you are travelling overseas:

- Check the Safe Travel website for up to date health advice for each country you are visiting: safetravel.govt.nz
- Check you are up to date with any relevant vaccination requirements for the country or countries you are visiting. Contact your doctor or healthcare provider to discuss and seek advice.
- If you are travelling to areas affected by avian influenza, you should avoid:
 - farms and live animal markets, entering areas where animals may be slaughtered, or surfaces that appear contaminated with animal poos (faeces) or other animal body fluids.
 - close contact with wild or domesticated birds.

Food Safety

Avian influenza is sensitive to heat, meaning that cooked food and pasteurised milk is safe to consume. You cannot get avian influenza by eating fully cooked poultry, eggs, or drinking pasteurised milk. For more information on avian influenza and food safety, see the MPI link at the end of this information sheet.

Vaccination

Avian influenza vaccines are not routinely used anywhere in the world. However, the seasonal human influenza (flu) vaccine is recommended for some people who work with animals and are therefore at higher risk of exposure to the virus. Although the seasonal flu vaccine will not protect against avian influenza, it will protect against seasonal flu and reduce the risk of being infected with both types of influenza at the same time. There is a possibility that if a person became infected with both viruses at the same time, the viruses could change by sharing genetic material (known as reassortment) which could produce a new and highly infectious virus.

If you work with poultry, livestock or with animals in a vet or zoo, it is recommended you see your GP, doctor, hauora/healthcare provider or local pharmacy to get a flu vaccine once a year when they are available during 'flu' season. For more information on the flu vaccine, visit healthnz.govt.nz/flu-vaccine



For free general health advice and information

- Call Healthline on **0800 611 116**, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information about what to do next. You can choose to speak with a Māori clinician if you are calling between 8am and 8pm. Interpreter services and NZ Relay support are also available.
- For people living or visiting rurally, you can contact a doctor after hours at Ka Ora Telecare **0800 2 KA ORA (0800 252 672)** or kaora.co.nz. This service is available from 5.00pm to 8.30am on weekdays, and 24 hours a day on weekends and public holidays.
- Free NZ Relay Services are available at nzrelay.co.nz if you are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have speech communication difficulties.
- A dedicated helpline for Disability support is available Monday to Friday, between 8.00am and 5.00pm. Call free on **0800 11 12 13** or text **8988** for help and information or visit healthpoint.co.nz/disability-helpline



For more information

- healthnz.govt.nz/avian-influenza
- mpi.govt.nz/biosecurity/pest-and-disease-threats-to-new-zealand/animal-disease-threats-to-new-zealand/high-pathogenicity-avian-influenza/ (includes information on symptoms in birds and food safety)