

# Avian influenza (H5N1)

**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 people and generally require close unprotected contact with infected birds or other infected animals. **This type (H5N1 2.3.4.4b) has never been detected to spread between people.**



## How does H5N1 bird flu infect people?

H5N1 bird flu can spread from sick or dead birds or other infected animals to people through close, unprotected contact. Close, unprotected contact includes touching or handling infected animals, or their body fluids (e.g. saliva, mucus, droppings or milk) without using appropriate personal protective equipment like gloves, a face mask and eye protection.

People can become infected if they touch something contaminated by the virus and then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth. Infection may also occur by breathing in virus-containing droplets or dust during activities such as cleaning areas where infected animals have been. It is very unlikely that someone will get H5N1 bird flu from another person.



## Signs and symptoms – what you can see and feel

Many people with H5N1 bird flu will likely experience no symptoms, or mild illness (similar to seasonal flu). However, H5N1 bird flu may cause severe illness and death in some people.

### Symptoms of H5N1 bird flu include:

- fever (a temperature over 38°C) or chills
- red or swollen eyes or eyelids (conjunctivitis)
- a cough, sore throat, shortness of breath or chest pain
- headache, muscle aches or joint pain
- stomach pain or runny poos (diarrhoea).



## People at higher risk of infection

The people most likely to become infected are those who work with or handle sick or dead birds, other animals infected with H5N1 bird flu, or their body fluids without wearing appropriate protective equipment. The risk is higher when contact is close, frequent or lasts for a long time.



## What should I do if I have symptoms of H5N1 bird flu?

If you, or someone you live with, have had recent close contact with sick birds or other sick animals and have symptoms of H5N1 bird flu, please seek medical help. Contact your GP, hauora or healthcare provider for advice. Your healthcare provider may take a throat, nose and/or eye swab to test for infection.

You can also call Healthline on 0800 611 116, anytime 24/7 for free health advice and information (interpreters are available, refer to **For more information** below for further details on support services). **In an emergency call 111.**



## What happens if I get H5N1 bird flu?

If you get H5N1 bird flu, your local public health service will provide guidance and support. You will need to be assessed by a doctor, and antiviral treatment medicine may be offered so you do not get as sick. Some people who get H5N1 bird flu may become seriously unwell and need hospital care.

It is extremely unlikely that you will pass your illness on to others as this type of bird flu has never been detected to spread between people, but it is important to stay away from people who may get very unwell just in case.

Just like with other flu illnesses, you should not return to work or school, or spend time with people who could get very unwell until at least 24 hours after your symptoms have started to improve and any fever (a temperature over 38°C) has gone away for at least 24 hours.



## What should I do if I've been exposed to H5N1 bird flu?

If you or someone you live with has had recent close contact with animals with H5N1 bird flu, contact Healthline on 0800 611 116 and they will connect you with your public health service team if they think you are at risk of infection. Your local public health service can provide advice and support.

You may be offered a course of antiviral medicine to protect you from serious illness. If your risk is low, antivirals will not usually be recommended. You can continue with your usual activities (including work and school) unless you develop symptoms—if you do develop symptoms, you should stay home and avoid close contact with others who may get very unwell until you've received further advice.



## How can H5N1 be prevented?

- Do not touch sick or dead birds or other animals. If you see 3 or more sick or dead wild birds in a group, report it immediately to the exotic pest and disease hotline on 0800 80 99 66.
- Keep tamariki and pets away from sick or dead birds or other animals.
- Wash your hands after being around birds or animals, or in contaminated areas.
- Guidance on protecting yourself from avian influenza is available from the Ministry for Primary Industries website at [mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu](https://mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu)

### Food safety:

Avian influenza viruses are sensitive to heat, meaning that cooked food (e.g. eggs and chicken) and pasteurised milk are safe to consume. More information is available at [mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu/avian-influenza-food-safety-and-human-health](https://mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu/avian-influenza-food-safety-and-human-health)

### Immunisation:

Immunisation against avian influenza is not available in New Zealand. However, everyone aged over 6 months is recommended to get a seasonal flu vaccine. Although this does not protect against avian influenza, it reduces the risk of dual infection with both avian and human influenza and these viruses combining to form a new and more infectious virus. This is particularly important for people who work with animals. More information (including whether the vaccine is free for you) is available at [healthnz.govt.nz/flu-vaccine](https://healthnz.govt.nz/flu-vaccine)



### For more information

- Visit the Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora website [healthnz.govt.nz/avian-influenza](https://healthnz.govt.nz/avian-influenza) and [healthnz.govt.nz/flu-vaccine](https://healthnz.govt.nz/flu-vaccine)
- Visit the Ministry for Primary Industries website for information on protecting yourself and birds from avian influenza [mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu](https://mpi.govt.nz/bird-flu)
- 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.
- Call the free Vaccination Helpline on **0800 28 29 26**. Support is available Monday to Friday, between 8.30am and 5.00pm. You can choose to speak with a Māori or Pacific advisor, or a disability advisor. 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](https://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](https://nzrelay.co.nz) if you are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have speech communication difficulties.
- A 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](https://healthpoint.co.nz/disability-helpline)