

Uptick in avian flu cases poses little threat to humans

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If the recent increase in avian influenza cases has you concerned, you likely have nothing to worry about and don't need to take any added measures, according to a University of Alberta expert on influenza in

birds.

As with human flu, there are a variety of strains of [avian flu](#), explains Katharine Magor, a professor in the Department of Biological Sciences. It's the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain that has now infected several poultry populations across Canada, including Alberta. Migratory [birds](#) may be the cause of the recent swell in cases.

"We think that's why it's coming through now, in the springtime," says Magor.

The risk to humans is incredibly low, Magor explains. Avian flu is a [respiratory virus](#) that needs wet environments to stay alive and viable, and depends on direct contact for transmission.

"It's spread by contact with secretions from the eyes, nose and mouth and fresh excrement [of birds]."

There is a small percentage of people who may want to take added measures if they interact often with wild birds, or birds that may be in contact with wild birds, posing a small risk that they may expose themselves to potentially infectious secretions.

Workers who are responsible for handling the birds in large commercial facilities and farms should wear full protective gear including N95 masks if they are culling infected birds. They should also change footwear before entering facilities after they've been walking around the farm, says Magor, although she notes such locations are likely already taking these measures.

Individuals with backyard chicken coops or other poultry should keep poultry indoors or in restricted environments to ensure they won't accidentally come in contact with any wild birds such as wild geese or

ducks—a preventative measure the Edmonton Valley Zoo recently took with their birds.

Hunters should also take caution in how they interact with any sick or dead birds they may come across outdoors, Magor notes.

"If hunters are hunting [wild birds](#) like game birds and snow geese, they need to be very careful."

They should avoid touching bird carcasses and reconsider hunting a particular type of bird if they come across a sick or dead bird that may have infected the flock. Additionally, hunters should clean birds out in the field, wearing gloves at all times.

People don't need to be concerned about walking their pets, even in damp areas near a body of water like a lake. Pet owners should simply ensure their pet doesn't pick up any bird carcasses while outside.

According to Magor, there is also no concern of transmission through cooked poultry or eggs. Commercial farms already have extremely high levels of biosecurity, she explains. Any type of infected bird would not make it into the [food chain](#), so there's no risk in purchasing any type of poultry products.

The virus is disproportionately infecting [poultry](#) populations because of a particular gene they're lacking. Magor's research looks at the gene, which is involved in detecting influenza.

"The gene is uniquely missing in chickens, turkey and possibly other farm birds like pheasants, but is present in other birds, as well as in humans."

Provided by University of Alberta

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