

Avian influenza A(H5N1)



Overview

Avian influenza A(H5N1) is a subtype of avian influenza virus that mainly infects birds. It has also been identified in other animals and occasionally has infected humans.

Current situation

There have been many cases of A(H5N1) infection in cows and birds in the US and Canada. While human cases have primarily occurred through direct contact with infected birds or contaminated environments, Health Canada currently rates risk to people in Canada as low. Human-to-human transmission is rare.

Prevention

Avian influenza is primarily spread through contact with contaminated materials, like animal feces or other secretions. Transmission occurs via inhalation of these materials or direct contact with mucus membranes (eyes, nose, mouth). Proper protections can prevent the virus from spreading to humans.

Higher-risk environments

Some jobs require handling animals or working in environments contaminated by animal feces or other secretions. These hazards can increase the risk of exposure to A(H5N1). Workers in close contact with the following animals or who work in environments that have been contaminated by them should use adequate precautions:

- Poultry
- Livestock (including cattle, goats and pigs)
- Wild birds and wildlife
- Other animals suspected or confirmed to be infected with A(H5N1)

Precautions

If you have close contact with any of the listed animals or exposure to contaminated environments, take the following precautions:

- Wear appropriate masks (fit-tested) and eye/face protection.
- Use protective clothing such as gloves, boots and coveralls.

- Mist dry areas with low-pressure water before cleaning to prevent contaminated materials from becoming airborne.
- Change clothing and footwear and wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before other activities.
- Follow any additional occupational health guidelines, as directed by your occupational health provider, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health or other health authorities.

Risk assessment and control measures

An evaluation of worker exposure risks must be completed in high-risk conditions. Control measures must protect workers' airways and mucous membranes from infection. In addition to personal protective equipment (PPE), proper isolation and decontamination practices should be used to prevent accidental infection.

Symptoms and reporting

Like many other influenza infections, A(H5N1) symptoms can vary widely depending on the person. Some people may experience no symptoms at all. Others may experience severe illness requiring hospitalization. Symptoms may include:

- Pink eye (conjunctivitis)
- Mild flu-like symptoms
- Fever or feeling feverish
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Congestion
- Muscle or body aches
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Pneumonia

Workers experiencing flu symptoms who may have been exposed to birds, livestock or wild animals should contact a healthcare practitioner and fill out exposure notice and compensation forms. They may also need to file a workers' compensation claim and notify their joint health and safety committee.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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