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PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

To: All Health Care
From: Dr. Isaac Benowitz, Maine CDC State Epidemiologist
Subject: **Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Guidance and Recommendations**
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Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Guidance and Recommendations

I. Summary

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has confirmed highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) A(H5N1) in a backyard bird flock in Knox County. This is the first time Maine has detected HPAI in the State. Though HPAI can cause illness in humans, no human cases with this specific viral strain have been detected in the United States to date.

Healthcare providers evaluating patients with respiratory symptoms should ask about recent exposures to wild and domestic birds and should consider influenza infection, including HPAI infection, as a possibility. Respiratory specimens collected from individuals with symptoms of influenza-like illness and bird exposures should be sent directly to Maine's Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) for influenza testing.

II. Background

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (U.S. CDC), [the current HPAI detections do not present an immediate public health concern](#). HPAI A(H5N1) viruses found in wild and domestic birds usually do not infect people, but rare cases of human infection with these viruses have been reported.

Infected birds shed HPAI in their saliva, mucous, and feces. Human infections can occur when enough virus gets into a person's eyes, nose, or mouth, or is inhaled. Illness in people can range from mild to severe. Avian influenza viruses could possibly mutate and gain the ability to spread between people, making monitoring for human infection and person-to-person spread extremely important.

III. Evaluation, testing, and treatment of patients presenting with respiratory symptoms who have had recent contact with sick or dead birds¹

Evaluation: The reported signs and symptoms of HPAI in humans range from mild to severe and include conjunctivitis, influenza-like illness (e.g., fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches) sometimes accompanied by nausea, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and vomiting, severe respiratory illness (e.g., shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, pneumonia, acute respiratory distress, viral pneumonia, respiratory failure), neurologic changes (altered mental status, seizures), and the involvement of other organ systems. As with seasonal influenza, some people are at high risk of getting very sick from avian influenza infections, including pregnant women, people with weakened immune systems, and people 65 and older.

Testing: Currently, SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) and seasonal influenza viruses are circulating in Maine, along with other seasonal respiratory viruses. For patients with respiratory symptoms who have had recent contact with sick or dead birds, testing should include SARS-CoV-2 and influenza. Specimens for influenza testing from patients with close contact to sick or dead birds should be sent directly to HETL following LSIS guidance <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/submitting-samples.shtml>.

Treatment: U.S. CDC recommends neuraminidase inhibitors for treatment of human infection with avian influenza A viruses. Treatment should be started as soon as possible for symptomatic patients. Guidance on the use of antiviral medications for avian influenza infections can be found at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/novel-av-treatment-guidance.htm>. At this time, the Maine CDC does not recommend prophylaxis for asymptomatic individuals with recent contact to birds with HPAI A(H5N1) unless they are at high risk for complications, as determined by a clinician.

¹ Recent contact may include direct contact with birds (e.g., handling, slaughtering, defeathering, butchering, preparation for consumption), direct contact with surfaces contaminated with feces or bird parts (carcasses, internal organs, etc.), or prolonged exposure to birds in a confined space.

For More Information

- [US CDC: How Infected Backyard Poultry Could Spread Bird Flu to People](#)
- [USDA: 2022 Detections of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza](#)
- [US CDC: Avian Influenza: Information for Health Professionals and Laboratorians](#)
- [US CDC: Testing Guidance for Clinicians When SARS-CoV-2 and Influenza Viruses are Co-circulating](#)
- [US CDC: Testing Guidance for Clinicians When SARS-CoV-2 and Influenza Viruses are Co-circulating](#)
- [US CDC: Recent Bird Flu Infections in U.S. Wild Birds and Poultry Pose a Low Risk to the Public](#)
- [Maine influenza website \(www.maineinflu.gov\)](http://www.maineinflu.gov)
- [Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation, and Forestry Avian Influenza information](#)