

Answering questions about **bird flu** for **subsistence hunters in Alaska**

March 2006



Prepared by ADF&G

What is bird flu?

Birds carry many kinds of flu viruses, but recently a more serious type of bird flu has developed. The technical name of this specific bird flu is Asian H5N1, but it is commonly just called bird flu. You may also hear it called avian flu, avian influenza, or Highly Pathogenic H5N1. This bird flu began in Southeast Asia where wild birds and people caught it from infected chickens. It is now spreading to birds in other countries, but has not yet been found in Alaska or North America.

How serious is bird flu?

Most types of bird flu don't cause serious harm. However, the Asian H5N1 type of bird flu is deadly to poultry and some wild birds—but it rarely infects people. Currently less than 200 people worldwide have caught this flu, and half of them survived. The reason health officials are worried is because flu viruses frequently change. Right now birds and people can only get bird flu from infected *birds*. If this bird flu or some other flu virus changes so that *people* could easily pass it to other people, it would be possible for it to spread to millions of people around the world. This would be called a pandemic. *This has not happened*, but governments want us to be prepared just in case.

Do we have bird flu in Alaska?

Not yet—but it's possible that it could arrive here with birds that return to Alaska from Asia this spring and summer. Infected wild birds have died in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Can we get bird flu from the birds we hunt?

The risk is very low—but we don't know for sure. So far, this bird flu has rarely infected humans. Also, people have *only* caught this bird flu from *domestically* raised birds, such as chickens. Nobody has caught this bird flu from *wild* birds. Wild birds carry viruses that are spread mainly through their droppings (anaq), so avoid contact with fresh bird droppings, handle birds cleanly, and thoroughly cook your birds.

Can we get bird flu from berries or bird eggs?

Bird viruses are found in bird droppings, so they could be on the *outside* of eggs. Even if a mother bird was infected, the virus would not be *inside* her eggs. Washing eggs is always a good idea, and cooking eggs kills any viruses and bacteria that cause illness. There is very little chance that bird droppings are on berries, but it is a good practice to wash berries, too.

Can we get bird flu from store-bought chicken?

No. Chicken and turkey sold in the U. S. is regularly inspected and tested, and comes from North American farms free of Asian H5N1 bird flu. Also, no birds, poultry or eggs are allowed into the U. S. from infected parts of the world.

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How worried should we be about bird flu?

There's no need to stop your subsistence practices. Just follow the safety guidelines.

What safety guidelines should we follow?

- Don't handle birds and game that appear sick or you find dead.
- Use rubber gloves when cleaning birds and game, and gathering eggs.
- Don't eat, drink or smoke while cleaning birds and game; keep your hands away from your face and mouth.
- Wash your hands with soap and water, or alcohol wipes or gel after cleaning birds and game.
- Clean all tools and surfaces immediately; use hot soapy water first, then disinfect with a mix of 1 part bleach to 10 parts water.
- Keep dead birds and game meat cool, clean & dry. Wash eggs.
- Cook birds and game thoroughly (155 – 165 degrees). Cook eggs.

What is being done about bird flu in Alaska?

Wildlife agencies are prepared to sample thousands of birds for bird flu this summer. They are coordinating with wildlife agencies across the U. S. and Canada, and working closely with Alaska public health agencies.

What else do we need to know?

You need to keep up with current news and information. The situation with bird flu is constantly changing and advice may change. **Stay informed!**

Where can we go for more information?

For bird information or to report sick or dead birds:

Alaska Dept. of Fish & Game

Anchorage (907) 267-2257, Fairbanks (907) 459-7206, Juneau (907) 465-4148, or your local ADF&G office.

website: www.wildlife.alaska.gov/aawildlife/disease/avian_influenza.pdf

U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Toll free 1-866-527-3358 (1-866-5 BRD FLU), or your local refuge office.

website: alaska.fws.gov/media/avian_influenza/index.htm

For human health information:

Alaska Dept. of Health & Social Services, Section of Epidemiology

Anchorage (907) 269-8000, or your local health aide, clinic or hospital.

website: www.epi.alaska.gov/id/influenza/fluinfo.htm and select *Avian Influenza*.