

Doctor's Orders: Avian Flu

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Doctor's Orders is a monthly column by veterinarians from the Utah State University School of Veterinary Medicine aimed at providing practical knowledge for producers in the Intermountain West. It appears in [The Post Register's Intermountain Farm & West](#). This month's column is by Dr. Shawn Zimmerman.

The Intermountain West and much of the rest of the country is experiencing an outbreak of avian flu, also known as bird flu or avian influenza. While people are at very low risk for this disease, we can easily spread it, and birds are at high risk for contracting and dying from avian flu. Producers, hobbyists and even hunters should be mindful of what they can do to limit the spread of avian flu.

Symptoms

Bird flu rarely causes disease in people, and only one person has tested positive in the current outbreak. They had minor symptoms and recovered quickly.

In birds, however, the first sign of avian flu is often sudden and unexplained death, as it frequently doesn't produce symptoms beforehand. When symptoms are present in birds, they include coughing or sneezing; neurological issues, such as disorientation, stargazing or spastic movements; lowered feed or water intake; decreased egg production or soft or misshapen eggs; diarrhea; depression; bruising on the feet, legs or internal organs; swollen head; or blue or purple-colored combs.



Avian flu is most likely to break out in the western states between April and May. That's when waterfowl are migrating, but prolonged cooler weather can extend the danger period.

If one of your birds dies unexpectedly or exhibits any of the clinical signs above, you should consult a veterinarian immediately. Avian influenza is a reportable foreign animal disease, and cooperating with state and federal officials will help to stop the spread of avian influenza in your area.

How to Protect Birds

You can spread avian influenza just as easily as birds can. Contaminated hands and feet are prone to transmitting the virus. Always wash your hands both before and after contact with birds, and change into different footwear whenever you care for them. Dedicated bird-only footwear is best.

It's also important to consider your birds' environment. Identify a "protectable barrier," such as a coop or pen opening, and limit human and pet access to it and everything inside.

Never use ponds, rivers or other open water sources to water your birds or clean equipment. If a water source is suspect, chlorinate it first.

Purchase poultry only from reliable sources, particularly National Poultry Plan-certified hatcheries and dealers. Do not buy poultry from swap meets or live markets. If you buy new birds or travel with birds you already own, quarantine them for three weeks upon returning.

If you hunt waterfowl, always shower and change your clothes before interacting with other birds.

In the Wild

Waterfowl are the natural reservoir of avian influenza varieties, so these viruses tend to spread amongst these populations when they congregate. Infection and dispersion occur through close contact with infected flockmates and fecal contamination in water sources. Since waterfowl migrate around the globe, they can easily and rapidly spread the virus as they travel. This is especially an issue when infected waterfowl share open water sources or otherwise come into contact with other wild birds, domestic waterfowl and poultry.

Wild birds are very likely to encounter contaminated water sources or infected waterfowl during peak migration times. In Idaho and Utah, confirmed wild bird deaths include geese, pelicans and owls.

Consequences

Avian flu has killed around 38 million poultry as of June 1. Currently, 41 out of 50 states have reported positive cases of this virus in various domestic and wild bird species, including Washington and Alaska. Because of the damage to local economies and ecosystems and the risk of a mutation that could reliably spread to humans, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is closely monitoring the situation and is taking steps to control spread of the disease.

While it will take time to understand the full effect the virus has had, we can all do our part to mitigate the damage to birds and livelihoods in our communities. Vigilant disease surveillance and prevention strategies are critical to protecting not only wild birds from avian influenza, but also ourselves.