

Avian Influenza

Avian influenza or bird flu is an infectious disease of birds caused by strains of the influenza virus and can cause sickness and death among poultry. The disease occurs worldwide and all birds appear to be susceptible, though some species are more resistant to infection than others.

According to the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry all commercial or domesticated poultry and many wild bird species including chickens, turkeys, pheasants, partridges, quail, ducks, geese, guinea fowl and ostriches are susceptible to infection. Viruses can be brought into Australia by nomadic or migratory wild birds.

Avian influenza is a zoonotic disease, that is, a disease which is capable of being spread directly or indirectly to humans through their contact with meat-producing animals and their products. Avian influenza virus has been transmitted to humans who come into very close contact with infected birds and their excretions. More than 60 people have died across Asia due to a strain of the virus.

There have been no incidents of avian influenza in humans reported in Australia.

Clinical signs and symptoms of avian influenza in humans include fever, sore throat, respiratory distress, pneumonia, conjunctivitis and, in some cases, death. The exact incubation period in humans is not known because there are so few cases but it is probably a 3-7 day period before symptoms would appear.

Although investigations are ongoing on recent outbreaks, there is currently no evidence of human-to-human transmission with the avian influenza strain. If there were a significant threat to human health due to the emergence of influenza viruses capable of human-to-human transmission this could lead to a global outbreak of human influenza. In this circumstance, the Australian Government would activate the Australian Action plan for Pandemic Influenza.

Avian influenza and the workplace

OHS responsibilities in managing risks associated with avian influenza.

Employers have a general duty under section 21 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 to provide a workplace that is safe and without risks to health. Employees also have a responsibility for their own safety and that of others by working in a safe manner. This includes situations where employees and contractors may be at risk of contracting avian influenza.

If there is concern about the risk of employees being exposed to avian influenza while at work, the employer should assess the risks with reference to all available information, implement appropriate controls and have a plan of action should employee/s or poultry or birds become ill with the virus.

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Avian influenza is an infectious disease. Some workplaces that already have particular risks regarding infectious diseases (for example, hospitals, laboratories, zoos, poultry farms) should already have infection control strategies in place. After assessing the risks with regard to avian influenza, these workplaces may decide that the existing infection controls are adequate to deal with the risks arising from avian influenza.

It is important that any prevention and control strategies/policies are developed in consultation with employees. Information and/or training must also be provided to ensure that all employees potentially affected are aware of the risks and the control strategies.

Employers might breach their duty if there is a recognised hazard and they do not take steps to eliminate or reduce the risk so far as is reasonably practicable. This would include taking any necessary steps aimed at the prevention of risks associated with work situations where employees, contractors and non-employees may be at risk of contracting avian influenza.

Employees travelling to affected areas

The Commonwealth Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade advises that there is a very low risk of contracting the disease from occasional contact with an infected bird such as when travelling on public transport in affected countries. The World Health Organisation has not advised against travel to any of the affected countries.

The Department of Health and Ageing advises that Australians intending to travel to affected areas for short periods should discuss the risk of avian influenza with their doctor as part of their routine pre-travel health checks.

At any point in time, where an employer determines that employees have recently visited an area affected by avian influenza or will visit an affected area for work they should seek further advice available from the Commonwealth Departments of Health and Ageing, Foreign Affairs and Trade and/or Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (see below) and consult with and provide information to those employees.

Further information

If you have any immediate concerns regarding avian influenza in your work environment, please note that the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing has established a national information phone line for enquiries from the public. The phone line is staffed seven days a week from 8.30am to 5pm. Call 1800 004 599.

To report or seek advice on unusual disease symptoms, abnormal behaviour or unexpected deaths in birds, call the Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on 1800 675 888.