Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in Pets: Information for Veterinarians

Winter 2025

What is HPAI?
Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, or HPAI, is a highly contagious virus that primarily affects wild and domestic birds. The current outbreak of avian influenza, which has been circulating globally since 2022, is caused by the H5N1 virus. This strain has affected domestic and wild birds, as well as diverse groups of mammals from dairy cattle to sea lions and rarely humans. In Utah, H5N1 infections have been in confirmed in commercial and backyard poultry, dairy cattle, and wildlife (red fox, waterfowl, and raptors).

How does HPAI impact pets?
According to the CDC, as far back as the early 2000s, cases of H5N1 in cats were confirmed in Thailand and Germany. During this recent outbreak, all types of felines, including big cats in zoos and farm cats on dairies have been found to be particularly susceptible to the virus. According to the World Organization for Animal Health, "cats are not significant epidemiological vectors of avian influenza to humans or other animals", however, the health of the cats themselves is at risk if proper precautions are not taken. Dogs can also contract HPAI, although they seem to be less susceptible than cats. The best practice to limit exposure to HPAI for dogs is to follow the same recommendations as for cats.

How do pets become exposed to HPAI?
Currently, there are 2 types of H5N1 virus circulating throughout the US, the wild bird strain and the dairy-associated strain. Both of these types has been the confirmed cause of infection in a small number of cats in the US. The source of infection, where determined, has overwhelmingly been from contaminated feed materials.

The wild bird strain has been isolated from cats with outdoor access who ate infected birds or other wildlife. Additionally, indoor cats have become infected with this strain by eating raw pet food diets containing infected poultry or wildlife.

The dairy associated strain has sickened and killed cats that gain access to unpasteurized milk, either directly from the farm or being fed raw milk products.

What are the signs of H5N1 in cats?
- Lethargy
- Inappetence
- Fever
- Progressive respiratory signs
  - Conjunctivitis
  - Nasal and ocular discharge
  - Dyspnea
- Progressive neurologic signs
  - Tremors
  - Seizures
  - Incoordination
  - Blindness
- Sudden death

What Should Veterinarians Do if They Suspect HPAI?
- Follow CDC Recommendations for evaluating and handling animals potentially infected with H5N1 HPAI.
- Implement isolation and patient handling protocols for suspected infectious / zoonotic disease cases.
- Contact the Utah State Veterinarian's Office at (801) 982-2235 or through the online reportable disease form.
- Submit samples to the Utah Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory in Logan.

Sample Submission Guidelines:
Sample collection materials:

- Sterile plastic swabs (no wooden handles)
- Transport media (BHI broth or MTM)

Collect the following samples:

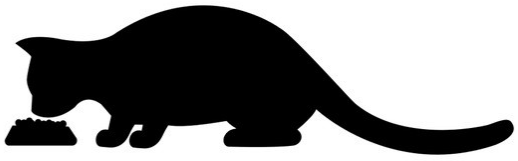
- Live pet: Nasal swab or deep oropharyngeal swabs
- Dead/euthanized pet: brain tissue or brain swabs

Storage prior to shipping

- Refrigerate if less than 3 days
- Freeze if stored more than 3 days

Ship with either ice packs (if refrigerated) or dry ice (if frozen) overnight to the Utah Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory (see address to the right).

- Submission form



Utah Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory

950 E 1400 N
Logan, UT 84341
(435) 797-1895

How Can Pet Owners Prevent HPAI Exposure In Their Pets?

- Avoid feeding raw or undercooked meat products.
- Prevent pets from hunting and eating wild animals.
- Avoid feeding raw dairy products(pasteurized dairy is safe).
- Limit pet contact with sick or dead animals.
- Wash your hands after handling raw animal products or coming into contact with sick/dead animals.
- Report sick or dead wild birds to the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources at (801) 538-4700.
- Keep pets and poultry away from wild birds.

Can people get H5N1 HPAI?

Yes. Although the risk is low.

For more information about disease in humans from H5N1 please visit the Department of Health and Human Services Website.