

Veterinarians offer tips for preventing bird flu in backyard chickens

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Chicken owners can help protect against avian influenza. Credit: Thinkstock/photo

With a potential increase in avian influenza this fall when wild waterfowl migrate south from their northern breeding grounds, the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine reminds chicken owners to be extra vigilant to help avoid their birds contracting or passing the virus.

Commonly called "bird flu," the [avian influenza virus](#) is routinely found

in wild waterfowl. When this virus spreads to chickens and other domestic poultry, it can cause significant mortality and economic loss. This year the nation has experienced the worst [bird flu outbreak](#) in history, with three confirmed cases in California—two of which carried the more dangerous, [highly pathogenic strain](#). In each case, the disease, which is not dangerous to humans, was introduced by wild waterfowl migrating along the Pacific Flyway. Some of these [wild birds](#) might now be carrying the Eurasian strain of the H5 highly [pathogenic avian influenza](#).

Reduce the risk of bird flu

Protecting their birds against disease should be a priority for chicken owners, no matter what size the flock, according to Maurice Pitesky, a poultry expert with the school and UC cooperative extension specialist.

"Wild birds are the biggest risk because they can carry the virus but look completely healthy, so it's important to keep them away from your chickens," said Pitesky. He adds that signs your chicken could have contracted avian influenza are depression, no appetite, diarrhea, soft/misshaped eggs, and sudden and increased or unexplained death in flocks.

The UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine and the California Department of Food and Agriculture offer some important biosecurity tips to help reduce the risk of your chickens contracting [bird flu](#):

- Wash your hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer before and after working with chickens.
- Use footbaths before entering and exiting the fenced-off coop area. Each footbath—a covered container with an approved disinfectant to disinfect shoes—should be placed in a staging station, such as on a concrete surface or a pallet, to prevent dirt

from being tracked into the footbath. Disinfectant should be changed daily to be effective.

- Have designated "coop boots." These will be the only shoes that go into your chicken area, and they won't go anywhere else. If you hunt waterfowl, make sure your equipment and clothing are separate from your domestic poultry.
- Don't allow wild animals and waterfowl to come in contact with your chickens. For example, if you have a pond or body of water that can attract waterfowl to or near your facility, consider draining if feasible.
- When obtaining birds, isolate them from other birds for 30 days before adding them into your flock. This will reduce the risk of introducing disease into the original flock.
- Always obtain birds from reputable, disease-free sources that practice good biosecurity methods, and purchase feed from clean, dependable suppliers. Store the feed in containers that are bird, rodent, and insect proof. Provide clean, fresh water to your birds at all times.
- Restrict access by visitors onto the premises where your birds are housed. Do not allow people who own other birds to come in contact with your birds.
- Report signs of illness or increased mortality to your veterinarian or the Sick Bird Hotline 866-922-BIRD (2473). In addition, necropsies are provided free-of-charge for owners of less than 1,000 chickens at the school's California Animal Health and Food Safety Laboratory System.

Early disease detection, prevention key to limiting spread of disease

State officials credit early disease detection and prevention, through proactive surveillance and good biosecurity practices, as key factors

limiting the spread of [avian influenza](#). For example, a wildlife surveillance program conducted by USDA Wildlife Services regularly submits samples to the veterinary school's California Animal Health and Food Safety Laboratory System at UC Davis for testing. This helps scientists and animal health officials understand where certain viruses are circulating in the U.S., including the more dangerous strains for domestic poultry. CAHFS also provides free necropsies for owners of backyard and small poultry and waterfowl flocks with less than 1,000 birds.

UC Davis poultry experts are conducting a statewide survey of backyard chickens, and providing outreach and training on health and disease prevention to individuals who, in turn, will provide the information to backyard chicken producers and small, commercial chicken operations. In addition, veterinary researchers Rodrigo Gallardo and Beate Crossley have recently been awarded a grant to study new, highly pathogenic viruses affecting the U.S. poultry industry. The goal is to better understand why these viruses have been so difficult to eradicate and to help prevent their introduction to commercial farms.

Provided by UC Davis

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