

Avian influenza - Health advice for individuals catching and handling wild birds

Updated: 10 April 2006

Scope

This guidance is aimed at those who may be handling birds, nests or eggs as a result of a licence issued under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, for example for conservation, monitoring or research purposes.

Background

With the spread of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 into western Europe, the potential for individuals to catch diseases through handling wild birds has received much attention. H5N1 has recently been recorded in a wild swan in Fife, Scotland. Whilst the risk of catching H5N1 from handling a wild bird is extremely low (there has yet to be a single case reported from anywhere in the world), this is not the only disease that birds can transmit and it is sensible to take all reasonable precautions. The advice below will help to keep any risks from bird diseases to a minimum.

Further information on the H5N1 strain of avian influenza can be found on Defra's website, including information on reporting dead birds to the Defra helpline (08459 335577) as part of the Government's avian influenza surveillance programme.

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/disease/ai/index.htm

A position statement on avian influenza has been issued by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee on behalf of the Country Conservation Agencies:

www.jncc.gov.uk/page-3519

The Health Protection Agency website has further information on bird diseases and the risks to humans: www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/zoonoses/menu.asp

Hygiene precautions when handling wild birds, nests or eggs

- i. Practice good personal hygiene and, in particular, make efforts to avoid bird faeces, which may carry a variety of diseases.
- ii. When handling birds keep cuts and abrasions completely covered by a waterproof dressing.
- iii. Avoid hand to mouth contact e.g. biting nails, sucking pens etc, when handling birds.
- iv. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water before eating or smoking and at the end of each period when wild birds have been handled. Hand wipes can be used in the absence of a water source and can also be used to clean faeces from clothes, equipment etc.
- v. Wash contaminated clothes using detergent. Choose a washing temperature that complies with the instructions provided by the manufacturer of the detergent.

Do not include other clothing in the same wash. If an item of clothing cannot be washed (eg waxed jacket), wash it down with water and detergent.

- vi Carry bags to put waste in if hand wipes or tissues are used, or to put soiled clothes in for transportation. Dispose of the sealed bag of waste in domestic or commercial waste.
- vii. When handling live birds do so in a well-lit and well-ventilated area and avoid the possibility of inhaling dried faecal or other material.
- viii. If you catch a bird which sneezes and/or has obvious discharges in or around the nares or beak, this may be evidence of respiratory infection. In this case release the bird immediately, wash your hands and, before it is reused, wash any equipment that has come into contact with the bird.

If you suspect you have an infection that may relate to the handling of birds tell your doctor and explain the activities that you have been involved with.

In order to avoid the possibility of transferring AI to poultry or domestic birds, vehicles, equipment, footwear and clothing used when catching and handling wild birds should not be taken onto poultry farms or used/stored in the vicinity of domestic ducks, poultry or other domestic birds (eg avicultural collections, pheasants etc).

This advice will be reviewed regularly and may be revised in the light of further information or developments in the spread of H5N1.