

Avian influenza: Protecting workers during an outbreak in livestock

Since 2022, avian influenza (H5N1) has spread around the world. While the virus that causes avian influenza initially infected birds, it now also infects cattle and other mammals. On rare occasions, people have also been infected, and the disease can be life-threatening. This bulletin discusses how farm employers can protect workers in case of outbreaks.

What is avian influenza?

Avian influenza (commonly known as “bird flu”) is a viral disease caused by infection with Type A influenza viruses. These viruses typically affect birds; however, they can also infect humans and other mammals, and symptoms vary from mild to severe.

How can workers be infected?

Workers can be infected if they live or work close to infected livestock (cattle, poultry, etc.) and inhale the virus or handle the animals’ manure or other bodily fluids, such as raw milk. Infection can also occur if workers touch objects contaminated with the virus and then touch their eyes, nose, or mouth.

What if an outbreak occurs on my farm?

If you suspect an avian influenza outbreak in your animals (e.g., they are sick or dying), you must take immediate action.

Every farm in British Columbia should follow the [National Biosecurity Standards and Biosecurity Principles](#) for their industry from the Canadian

Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). These documents outline how to implement your biosecurity protocols, including how to develop a standard operating procedure (SOP) for self-isolation.

Make sure everyone follows your enhanced biosecurity protocols for entering and leaving contaminated areas.

An outbreak will also require the use of safe work procedures and personal protective equipment, including respirators for workers.

It’s essential that no animals be taken from suspected infection areas. All materials, equipment, and people coming out of such areas must be decontaminated. Restrict access to contaminated areas if possible. If you must enter, follow the direction of the CFIA.

How can I protect myself and others during an outbreak?

Implement your SOP for self-isolation, use enhanced PPE, and follow instructions from the CFIA and your regional health authority (such as receiving your seasonal flu vaccination). Review these safe work practices with your workers and make sure they have any necessary training.

Restrict access

Limit and restrict access to contaminated areas, animals, and materials, as specified in the biosecurity protocols for your industry. Access should be limited to essential services only and as directed by your veterinarian and the CFIA.

Decontaminate

Decontamination, including handwashing, is very important. Anyone who has been in close contact with sick animals or contaminated surfaces must wash their hands immediately with soap and water for 20–30 seconds. Also wash hands after removing gloves and other PPE.

Decontamination facilities must be available and used when leaving a contaminated area. These may include showers, handwashing stations, and laundering facilities.

Use personal protective equipment (PPE)

PPE helps reduce the risk of infection. Anyone entering an area or doing tasks where there is a risk of exposure must wear PPE. This includes activities related to handling, treating, and caring for infected or potentially infected animals, as well as cleaning and disinfecting buildings, structures, and equipment.

Follow the biosecurity measures recommended for your industry when selecting PPE for your worksite.

Acceptable PPE includes:

- Steel-toe rubber boots or protective foot covers that are disinfected or disposed of after use
- Fluid-resistant coveralls or disposable coveralls
- Disposable nitrile gloves
- Head coverings or hair coverings
- Chemical safety goggles (not just safety glasses)
- Respirators

What are the requirements for respirators and other PPE?

A disposable particulate respirator (e.g., an N95) is the minimum protection needed for breathing hazards. If respirators are used at a workplace, a comprehensive respirator program must be in place.

For tight-fitting respirators, workers must be clean-shaven and fit tested for the model and size of respirator. Workers must also be trained to do a seal check to make sure the facepiece seals with the face.

Other PPE requirements include:

- Discard disposable PPE properly in sealed plastic bags.
- Clean and disinfect reusable or non-disposable PPE.
- Ensure that workers are trained in proper techniques for putting on, removing, and disposing of PPE.

Who do I contact if I suspect an outbreak on my farm?

- Your veterinarian
- Your nearest [CFIA](#) office
- The B.C. [Animal Health Centre](#) at 1.800.661.9903

Learn more

Visit worksafebc.com/avian-flu for more information and resources.

