

What is HPAI?

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), often referred to as “bird flu,” is a highly contagious virus that affects domestic poultry and wild birds. In the past few years, a strain of the virus (H5N1) has spread from birds to more than 50 other animal species, including dairy cows and humans.

Since 2022, there have been only four confirmed human cases related to bird and dairy exposure in the United States. Two of these cases were identified in Michigan dairy farm workers in May 2024. Both cases had significant exposure to ill dairy cows as part of their job function. The two cases occurred on different farms with no relation to each other.

What is the risk level?

Novel strains of influenza are considered a public health concern because the viruses can mutate to spread interspecies more effectively. While four human cases of HPAI have been identified, efficient human-to-human spread has not been observed. As of this time, testing of the virus has not shown evidence of mutations that would make the virus more transmissible to humans.

Data from national, state, and local influenza surveillance systems have also shown no signs of increased influenza activity. Based on current data, the CDC considers the risk of HPAI low and not a threat to the public.

Through rigorous inspection, national and state officials have confirmed that commercial beef, poultry, and milk supplies are safe for human consumption. Animals displaying signs or symptoms of illness are separated from the food chain. Food inspections have not shown any evidence of the virus in meat supplies sold in retail. Commercial milk and eggs sold in the United States are pasteurized in a heating process that eliminates viruses. Additional testing of pasteurized samples has not shown any signs of a live, infectious virus that could be transmitted to humans.

What is being done to prevent the spread of HPAI?

The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) is working in collaboration with federal, state, and local partners to respond quickly to HPAI detections in dairy cows and poultry. Farm workers who have been exposed to impacted animals are currently being monitored and asked to report any symptoms.

As of June 5, 2024, no farms in Kent County have been impacted. KCHD is working closely with MDHHS and MDARD to stay abreast of new and current developments. If a potential case of HPAI is detected, KCHD communicable disease investigators are trained to work alongside MDHHS to monitor the health status of residents residing or working on farms.

What should you do?

While the risk of HPAI transmission is low, people should avoid consuming raw milk. Raw milk has not been pasteurized and may contain viruses or harmful pathogens.

People should follow proper food safety practices when handling and cooking poultry and eggs. The proper cooking of poultry and eggs to an internal temperature of 165°F will kill any foodborne germs that may be present, including HPAI.



MDARD recommends that members of the public do not visit dairy and poultry farms to reduce the risk of disease spread. Schools, daycares, and camps should cancel or postpone any planned trips to farms.

Any individual who has visited a farm should monitor themselves for influenza-like symptoms for ten days after their visit. Signs and symptoms include fever, cough, sore throat, congestion, difficulty breathing, conjunctivitis (red, irritated eyes), sneezing, fatigue, body aches, headaches, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, and/or rash. If you experience any of the symptoms above after visiting a dairy or poultry farm, contact the KCHD Communicable Disease Unit by phone (616-632-7228) or email (cd_epi@kentcountymi.gov).