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THE CHECKUP WITH DR. WEN

Opinion | On dogs, birds and pigs: Addressing reader concerns about bird flu

Why it's so concerning that a pig has contracted the H5N1 virus.

4 min 12



Pigs eating from a trough at a farm in Las Vegas. (John Locher/AP)

By Leana S. Wen

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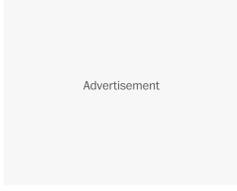
You're reading *The Checkup With Dr. Wen*, a newsletter on how to navigate medical and public health challenges. [Click here to get the full newsletter in your inbox](#), including answers to reader questions and a summary of new scientific research.

Like many of you, I am still processing the results of Tuesday's election. I plan to write about how it will impact public health and health policy in upcoming newsletters.

In my column this week, I explored [four reasons](#) why the evolution of the H5N1 avian flu is concerning public health experts. Readers had many specific follow-up questions, which I address here.

"Scientists in my state seem especially worried that a pig tested positive for bird flu. Why is that?" asked Nora from Oregon. "Hasn't this virus infected thousands of cows and birds?"

Correct, the Agriculture Department estimates that H5N1 has affected more than [105 million birds](#) and documented outbreaks across 387 dairy herds in 14 states.



The worry has always been that H5N1 would spread to more mammals. Pigs are among the most-feared species in this regard.

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That's because pigs have long been known to be a mixing vessel for influenza viruses. In the past, pigs have become co-infected with avian flu and human flu viruses. When this happens, the viruses can exchange genes, leading to the creation of hybrid versions that might be able to spread more easily to other mammals, including humans.

Experts believe this phenomenon triggered the 2009 H1N1 swine flu pandemic. That virus is estimated to have infected as much as [one-fifth](#) of the world's population and killed around [284,000](#) people.

Thus far, only [one pig](#) has tested positive for H5N1. It occurred at a farm in Oregon that has an avian flu outbreak among its poultry. There is no evidence yet of pig-to-pig transmission, which would be an ominous development.

A number of readers are avid bird-lovers and want to know how to protect themselves. As one from Maryland wrote: "I love birds and enjoy my little bird feeder and all the birds that visit to feed on the wild bird seed I put in the feeder. Is this dangerous for me?" Edward from Pennsylvania says that he maintains six bird feeders, 15 birdhouses and five bird baths. "Am I exposing myself, unduly, to H5N1?"

While avian flu is widespread among wild bird species, [less than 2 percent](#) of cases have been in songbirds and other typical visitors to bird feeders. Health officials have not recommended taking down bird feeders except for people who keep domestic poultry as part of a backyard flock. (In such cases, the USDA says poultry owners should take down feeders for wild birds or keep them well away from their captive flock, and to make the captive flock's food and water inaccessible to wild birds.)

People should [clean bird feeders and bird baths](#) regularly. Make sure to thoroughly wash your hands after touching the feeders. Avoid direct contact with birds, and do not handle sick or dead birds.

"You wrote before about [cats getting the bird flu](#)," wrote Jennifer from Massachusetts. "Can dogs get sick from it, too?"

According to a report published in a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention journal [in June](#), 2 percent of hunting dogs in a Washington state sample had evidence of H5N1 infection. These dogs were exposed to waterfowl, which have a high rate of carrying H5N1. The dogs were asymptomatic, and no dog-to-dog or dog-to-human spread has been documented.

It's prudent to [keep dogs away](#) from wild birds, poultry, bird feces and, of course, dead birds. People should contact their veterinarian if their dog has signs of respiratory illness such as coughing, nose and eye discharge, and decreased appetite.

Angel from Virginia writes: "You've reassured us before that it's fine to keep drinking milk and eating meat. Do you still stand by that?"

Yes. Pasteurization [kills bird flu](#) and other viruses. It's safe to keep drinking pasteurized milk, though both humans and domestic animals should avoid drinking raw milk.

It's also fine to continue eating beef, chicken, turkey, pork and other meat products. Make sure they are cooked to the [appropriate temperature](#) to kill viruses and bacteria.

The CDC [affirms that the risk](#) of bird flu to the American public remains low. I agree with this assessment, though I urge federal health officials to ramp up testing efforts significantly. Controlling an outbreak begins with understanding how widespread the disease is, and far more must be done to test both humans and animals.

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