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The New York Times The Morning

December 4, 2024



By [David Leonhardt](#)

Good morning. We're covering what you should know about bird flu — as well as South Korea, Bangladesh and California.





Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Birds, cows, people

By now, you've probably seen some alarming headlines about bird flu, and you may be wondering how worried you should be. I understand the uncertainty.

On the one hand, we have all spent decades hearing alarming stories about strange viruses — like MERS, Ebola, dengue and Zika — most of which don't end up having a big effect on the U.S. On the other hand, one of those recent viruses turned into the life-altering Covid pandemic.

In today's newsletter, I want to help you make sense of bird flu, using four questions.

Making sense of H5N1

1. What is bird flu?

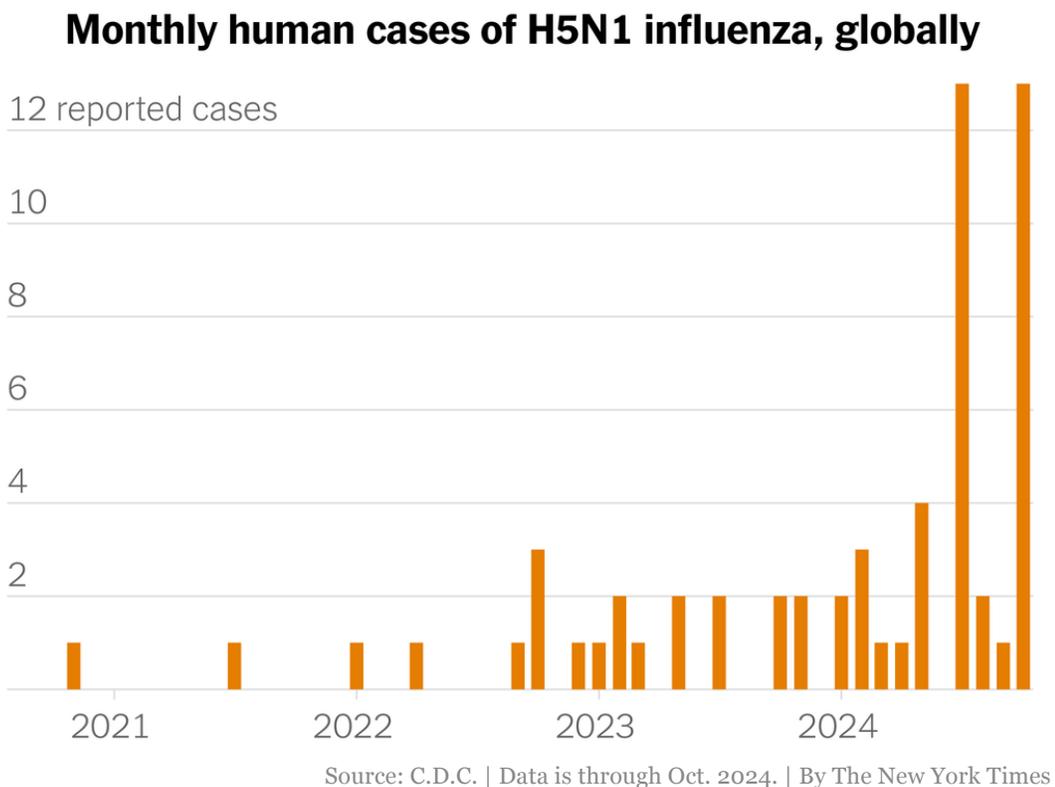
It's an influenza virus officially known as H5N1 (and sometimes called avian flu). It has been circulating for decades, and it attracted global attention in the late 1990s after an outbreak among chickens in southern China.

That outbreak was especially worrisome because it included the first documented human cases of the virus. At least 18 people were infected, six of whom died.

2. Why the recent concerns?

The virus has recently expanded in two ways: across regions and across species. Rather than being concentrated in Asia, bird flu has moved across much of the planet. And it has infected a wider variety of animals, including mammals. ([This Times story explains.](#)) Dairy cows in many parts of the United States have tested positive.

The number of human infections is also growing, as this chart by my colleague Ashley Wu shows:



Most concerning, at least four people have tested positive without evidently having had contact with a sick animal. One is them is a teenager in British Columbia who has been in critical condition. These infections raise the possibility that the virus can move from one human being to another, rather than only from an animal to a person. Human-to-human transmission can lead to much more rapid spread of a disease.

“I’m more worried about bird flu than I have been for a really long time,” Jennifer Nuzzo, director of the Pandemic Center at the Brown University School

of Public Health, told me.

3. What are the reasons to be hopeful?

There are a few. First, it's not yet clear whether those four recent cases stemmed from human-to-human transmission. Even if they did, such transmission might remain rare, involving extremely high levels of exposure to the virus. "Right now, H5N1 does not spread easily between people," said Caitlin Rivers, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

Second, H5N1 seems to have become less severe in human beings recently. The reasons aren't clear, Nuzzo says, but one possibility is that a different flu that emerged in 2009 — H1N1 — may confer some immunity for H5N1. Millions of people have since had H1N1.

As my colleague Apoorva Mandavilli says, "Very few people known to be infected with bird flu in the United States have become seriously ill, and none have died." Still, she notes that viruses evolve, often in ways that lead to more infections. And the upcoming winter could give bird flu more opportunities to mix with seasonal flu and mutate. If bird flu were to spread widely, even a low fatality rate could mean tens of thousands of deaths in the U.S.

4. How can the U.S. reduce the risks?

[More testing](#) — of birds, cows and farmworkers — would help. "We know very, very little about how far this virus has spread and how many people and animals have been infected," Apoorva said. Testing could allow farms to isolate infected animals and people.





In Wisconsin. Jim Vondruska/Reuters

What about a vaccine? A vaccine for bird flu exists, but [the supply is modest](#). Nuzzo believes the government should help expand production and make the vaccine available to farmworkers who want to receive it. More research on the vaccines also seems important, especially if the virus is evolving.

The bottom line

Rivers, the Johns Hopkins epidemiologist, recently published a book on preventing outbreaks called [“Crisis Averted.”](#) In it, she argues that one of the most effective public health strategies is honesty: Experts should level with people, rather than telling selective truths intended to shape behavior in paternalistic ways ([as happened during Covid](#)).

When I spoke with Rivers this week, I asked for some truth telling about bird flu. “As an epidemiologist, I’m worried,” she said. “I’m not worried as a mom or a member of my community. It’s not a threat that is imminent.”

But H5N1 bears watching. It is changing and spreading in uncertain ways, and it already presents a threat to many animals and to people who work closely with them.

For more: In Times Opinion, Zeynep Tufekci argues that President Biden

should be [more aggressive about fighting bird flu](#) before leaving office.

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THE LATEST NEWS

South Korea





Outside South Korea's Parliament. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

- South Korea's president, Yoon Suk Yeol, is [facing an impeachment motion](#) after he abruptly declared martial law and then lifted the order hours later.
- In his declaration, Yoon accused his political opposition of conspiring with North Korea to undermine the country. The leader of the opposing party rejected his claims and lawmakers voted to rescind the order.
- The order plunged the country into crisis. Troops stormed the country's Parliament, shares of major Korean companies fell and thousands protested. Now there are vigils [calling for Yoon to step down](#).
- Yoon had [regularly fought with the opposition party](#), which has used its supermajority in Parliament to block his proposed budget and impeach his close allies.

More International News





In Dhaka, Bangladesh. Elke Scholiers for The New York Times

- Bangladesh's previous government siphoned billions of dollars from the central bank, the bank's interim governor said. He characterized it as [a huge heist](#).
- China [banned exports of rare minerals](#) to the U.S., escalating a trade war
- A proposal to let people [learn gladiator fighting at the Colosseum](#) has caused outrage in Rome. Its opponents say it demeans a cultural treasure.
- A no-confidence vote in France's Parliament today could force the prime minister to resign, leaving his budget legislation in limbo. [Read what to expect](#).
- NATO's new top diplomat signaled that [Ukraine should put off any peace talks](#) with Russia until Western allies can send enough military aid to get it a stronger negotiating position.

Trump Administration

- Donald Trump’s lawyers moved to dismiss his convictions in his Manhattan criminal case, claiming that Biden’s pardon for his son Hunter proved that the case was biased. The Justice Department’s norms [are being challenged by two presidents](#).
- Trump’s transition team signed an agreement to let the F.B.I. [do background checks on incoming officials](#).
- Michael Bloomberg, the former New York mayor who has spent billions of dollars promoting public health, said that letting Robert F. Kennedy Jr. run U.S. health agencies would be [“medical malpractice on a mass scale.”](#)
- Trump’s choice to run the Drug Enforcement Administration, a Florida sheriff, [withdrew from consideration](#). Right-wing Trump supporters had criticized him for enforcing Covid rules during the pandemic.
- Donors who give \$1 million or more to Trump’s inauguration will get to [dine with Trump and JD Vance](#).
- Biden’s clean-energy and semiconductor laws mostly benefit Republican states. His aides hope that will [stop Republicans from repealing them](#) under Trump.
- Miami-Dade County renamed a street after Trump. Democrats on the county commission declined to block the move, [The Miami Herald reports](#).

More on Politics

- A Democrat won the country’s last uncalled House race, in California, leaving Republicans [a majority of no more than five seats](#).
- Biden spoke at the National Museum of Slavery in Angola, alongside [Black Americans whose descendants were enslaved there](#). He’s the first U.S. president to visit the country.

- Senate Democrats [re-elected Chuck Schumer](#) to be their leader. The party will be in the minority during the next Congress.
- A Republican senator dropped his objection to the promotion of a military officer who oversaw the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, clearing the way for him to become [a four-star general](#).
- Zoë Kestan met Hunter Biden at a Manhattan strip club in 2017. [Then her life changed forever](#).

Other Big Stories

- Leaders at the World Anti-Doping Agency [didn't tell the agency's own investigative unit](#) about Chinese swimmers' positive drug tests.
- Companies like Amazon are [trying to unseat Nvidia](#) as the top A.I. chip maker.
- [A burst of Arctic air](#) is set to hit much of the U.S. later this week. Several additional feet of snow may fall on the Great Lakes region.
- In a first, a transgender woman [won "model of the year."](#)

Opinions

Trump moderated his views on [marijuana, crypto and other habits](#) that appeal to young men. "Vice voters" may now be part of the Republican Party, **Charles Fain Lehman** writes.

The acceleration of technology and the way it replaces human labor help explain [declining trust in American institutions](#), **Jessica Grose** argues.

Christopher Blackwell is serving a 45-year sentence for robbery and murder. He writes about the regret he feels over the [first time he picked up a gun](#).

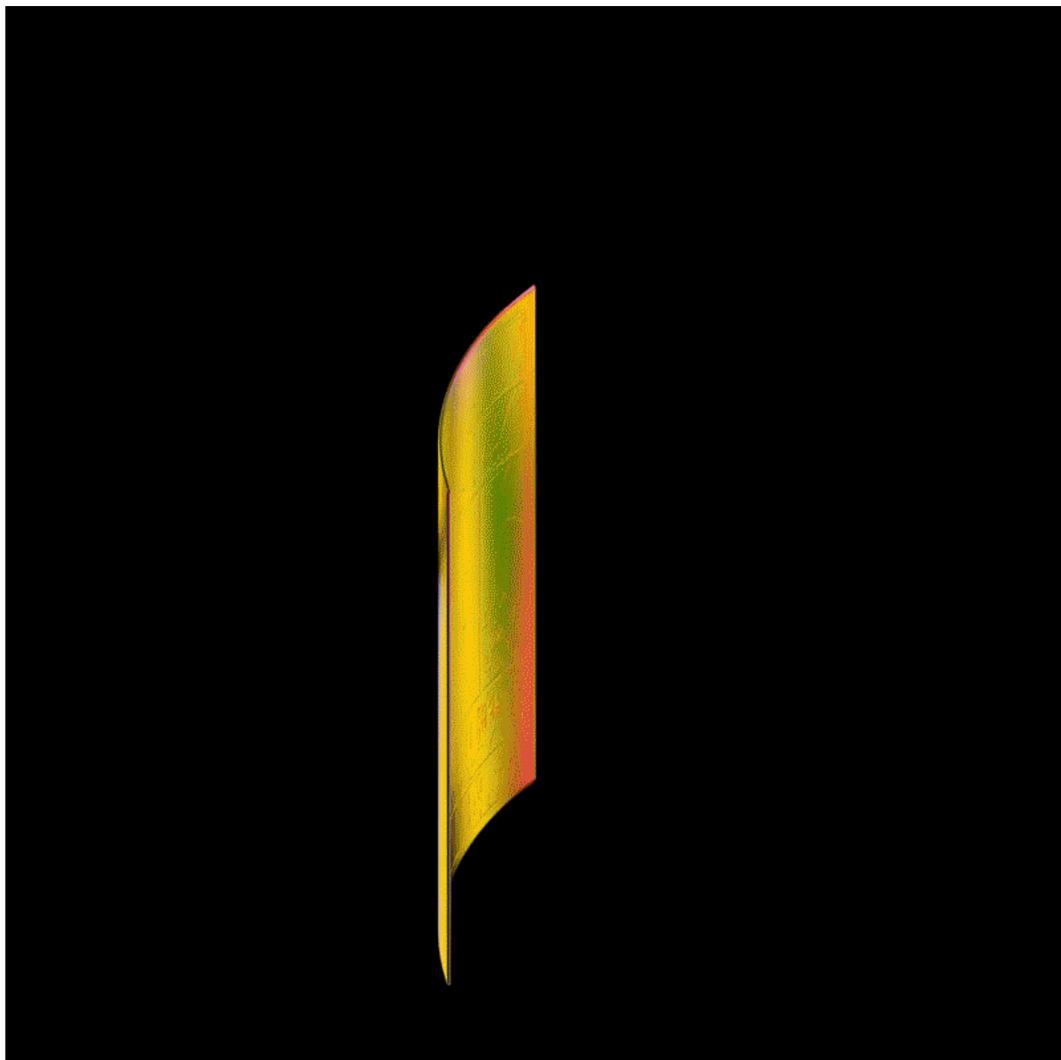
Here are columns by **Bret Stephens** on [a candidate to lead the Democratic Party](#) and **Thomas Edsall** on [Project 2025](#).

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MORNING READS



Karan Singh

Great reads: These are the [10 best books of the year](#), according to The New York Times Book Review.

On demand: Amazon and Walmart know that customers spend more when they can get same-day delivery. [Here's how they make it happen.](#)

Tradwife or tycoon? Hannah Neeleman, the woman behind Ballerina Farm, has a picture-perfect life as a Mormon farm owner. [We followed her for the day.](#)

Lives Lived: Hal Lindsey was a onetime tugboat captain who became a campus preacher and then the author of "The Late Great Planet Earth," which blended history and apocalyptic predictions. It was the bestselling nonfiction book of the 1970s. Lindsey [died at 95.](#)

SPORTS

College football: In the penultimate playoff rankings, Alabama was the big winner. [See the rankings here.](#)

ESPN: The network is in talks with Stephen A. Smith on a [contract extension o six years and \\$120 million.](#)

M.L.B.: Bids for Juan Soto, the free agent and the former Yankees slugger, [have reached \\$600 million.](#) He's expected to decide by next week.

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ARTS AND IDEAS



Arriving at the gala for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in November. Michelle Groskopf for The New York Times

Fund-raising galas, which generate donations for cultural institutions like opera houses and museums, are [growing ever more extravagant to attract wealthy patrons](#). The Los Angeles County Museum of Art's most recent fete, hosted by Leonardo DiCaprio, featured salted maple espresso martinis, Wagyu short rib

Leonardo DiCaprio, featured salsa music, espresso martinis, a DJ set and a performance by Charli XCX. It cost about \$3 million to stage the party — which brought in about twice that.

More on culture



Koyo Kouoh Tsele Nthane for The New York Times

- The [curator of the next Venice Biennale](#) will be Koyo Kouoh, from Cameroon. She will be the first African woman to take the role.
- Jasleen Kaur [won the Turner Prize](#), the prestigious British art award. Her recent work focuses on her childhood growing up in a Sikh community in Scotland.
- Debbie Nelson, the rapper Eminem's mother, died at 69. Their difficult

relationship [inspired some of his early hits](#).

- Three small Maine radio stations owned by the writer Stephen King [will shut down this month](#). King had kept them afloat for years, even as they lost money.
- Late night hosts joked about [Trump's upcoming visit to France](#).

THE MORNING RECOMMENDS ...



David Malosh for The New York Times

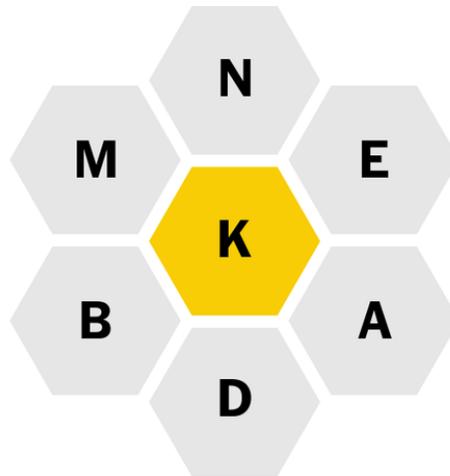
Make [this taverna salad](#) inspired by Greek and Lebanese dishes.

Pick the best blanco tequila

PICK [the best blanco tequila.](#)

Camp [in a better sleeping bag.](#)

GAMES



Here is [today's Spelling Bee](#). Yesterday's pangrams were *hometown* and *townhome*.

And here are [today's Mini Crossword](#), [Wordle](#), [Sudoku](#), [Connections](#) and [Strands](#).

Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. —David

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