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Avian influenza in wild animals: Health precautions for workers handling animals

- Avian influenza (H5N1) primarily affects birds. However, during the current outbreak, there have been a number of detections of the virus among mammals.
- Recently, a small cluster of skunks located in Vancouver and Richmond tested positive for the avian influenza virus.
- The current strain of avian influenza (H5N1) primarily affects birds and animals. It poses a low risk of spreading to people.
- However, **workers who come into contact with birds and wildlife, especially sick or dead animals, should continue to take precautions to protect themselves.**

What do I do if I encounter a sick or dead wild animal?

- If **birds** are found dead, **contact the BC Wild Bird Mortality Line at 1-866-431-2473**
- For **wild mammals** (e.g., foxes, mink, skunks) who are found alive and are acting strangely or showing signs of neurological illness (e.g., seizures, tremors, circling, excess salivation, inability to walk), **contact the BC Wildlife Health Program at 250-751-7246** during regular business hours. After hours, please leave a message or contact your nearest [wildlife rehabilitator](#)
- For **wild mammals** found dead, follow your organization's procedure for handling and reporting.

What precautions should I take when handling a sick or dead wild animal? ([Public Health Agency of Canada](#))

- In all situations, complete a risk assessment that considers the i) circumstances of the sick/dead animal, ii) the anticipated activities involving the animal, and iii) the environment where the activities will occur. The anticipated level of exposure will determine the precautions you need to take.
- **Ventilation:**
 - Whenever possible work in a well-ventilated environment.
 - If working outdoors, try to stay upwind to avoid inhaling dust, feathers and aerosols.

- If working indoors or in a poorly ventilated environment: Opening a door or window, and wearing a respirator can further reduce your exposure to dust, feathers and aerosols.
- **Protective equipment:**
 - Limit direct contact with a sick/dead animal and maintain distance (e.g., using a tool/shovel) whenever possible
 - If you are working with birds or mammals with signs of illness (e.g., respiratory signs such as difficulty breathing, secretions from the nose or mouth or neurologic signs such as seizures, tremors, circling, inability to walk), the following protective equipment is recommended:
 - Medical mask
 - Rubber or disposable gloves (e.g., nitrile)
 - Eye protection (e.g., goggles, face shields, safety glasses)
 - Disposable gown or coveralls
 - Disposable protective shoe/boot covers or rubber or polyurethane boots
 - Heavy gloves may be required in situations involving handling animals that can pierce skin with beaks, teeth or claws.
 - In situations where aerosols may be generated, use of a respirator may be required
- **Hand Hygiene:**
 - Wear disposable gloves (e.g., nitrile gloves) when cleaning equipment, or handling blood, feces, respiratory secretions, or contaminated feed and water.
 - Wash hands with warm soapy water or use hand sanitizer immediately after removing and discarding gloves.
 - Dispose of gloves and all potentially contaminated material immediately in an appropriate manner (e.g., sealed in plastic bag or biohazard)
- **Cleaning, Disinfection, and disposal**
 - Use appropriate disinfectants to sanitize equipment (e.g., sampling tools, animal restraint, holding, and transportation devices, banding tools or bird bags) or any potentially contaminated surface.
- **Avoid cross-contamination:**
 - Do not eat, drink or smoke, and do not touch your eyes or face while handling wildlife or cleaning contaminated areas and equipment.
 - Use separate clothing, equipment, and footwear for handling wild birds and other wildlife.

What about interactions with healthy animals and wildlife?

- There are no specific precautions recommended for avian influenza for animals and wildlife that appear to be healthy.
- Continue to follow routine precautions for interacting with animals in the wild, which is to avoid touching or feeding animals, not getting too close, and to avoid provoking or startling them.

What to do if you develop symptoms after handling animals?

It is uncommon for a virus in birds or mammals to readily infect humans. With the precautions recommended above, the risk is even lower. However, if you become ill with influenza symptoms (e.g., fever, headache, muscle pain, runny nose, sore throat, extreme tiredness, cough) within 10 days after handling wild birds and other wildlife, see your health care provider. **Inform your health care provider that you have been in contact with wildlife and are concerned about avian influenza, so that they can provide appropriate testing, advice, and treatment.**

Other resources:

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/plants-animals-and-ecosystems/wildlife-wildlife-habitat/wildlife-health/wildlife-health-documents/hpai_bc.pdf

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/avian-influenza>