

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI): When and How to Talk to Patients

A Resource for Health Care Providers

Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), also known as bird flu, is a zoonotic disease that can spread from birds and other animals to humans. While the risk to the general public at this time is low, it's essential to be proactive in addressing this potential threat, **especially if your patients work on farms with poultry or livestock**. Groups at higher risk of contracting HPAI may include farmworkers, poultry workers, individuals with backyard flocks or others working closely with animals.

When to start the conversation about HPAI

1 Annual physicals or check-ups:	Occupational exposure can be part of screening at the front desk, during triage/vitals or when the provider sees the patient so that they can address HPAI with higher risk patients rather than everyone.
2 Acute respiratory illness:	If a patient presents with respiratory symptoms like fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose/congestion or shortness of breath, HPAI should be considered in the differential diagnosis, notably if they also present with conjunctivitis, and especially during a local outbreak.
3 Occupational health visits:	For farmworkers, occupational health visits are ideal for discussing specific risks and preventive measures related to their work.

What to say to patients about HPAI

1 Acknowledge exposure risk:	Start the conversation when you suspect a patient may have been exposed to poultry, wild birds or cows, especially if they work on a farm or have frequent contact with these animals.
2 Explain HPAI in simple and clear language:	Avoid medical jargon and explain HPAI in simple terms.



KEY POINTS

- **“HPAI” is caused by an avian influenza virus**, a type of virus which usually infects wild birds and poultry. Other animals, including livestock like cows and pigs, can also be infected with this virus. A recent outbreak has been reported among dairy cattle in many states. It has the potential to spread through humans and cause severe disease because people do not have immunity to it.
- **It can spread through contact** with infected cattle, raw milk, birds, other animals or their feces.
- **HPAI symptoms in humans are similar to seasonal flu symptoms** but with some additions:

- Fever
- Cough
- Congestion/
runny nose
- Sore throat
- GI symptoms
- Muscle aches
- Fatigue
- Shortness of
breath

Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis can be a distinguishing feature of HPAI, setting it apart from other upper respiratory infections. Consider HPAI in patients presenting with conjunctivitis and a relevant exposure history.

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Focus on prevention:

Emphasize the importance of preventive measures like:

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- **Hand hygiene:** Encourage frequent handwashing with soap and water, especially after contact with animals or their environments.
- **Avoid sick birds:** Advise patients to avoid contact with sick or dead birds. Pets should also be kept away from sick or dead birds.
- **Use personal protective equipment (PPE),** especially farmworkers: Explain the proper use of PPE, such as gloves, masks and eye protection, when handling birds or cows, their droppings, raw milk or contaminated surfaces and water. *Farmworkers working with birds and cows should use PPE even if animals appear well.*
- **Have clothing dedicated for farm work:** Recommend that patients have a separate set of clothes for farm work. They should change into clean clothes before going home and wash their farm clothes separately from their other clothes.
- **Do not drink raw milk:** Discourage the consumption of raw or unpasteurized milk.

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Reassure patients:

Reassure patients that by following these guidelines, they can significantly reduce their risk of infection.

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Make a plan:

Make sure they know when and how to access health care services if they experience any HPAI symptoms.

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Open dialogue:

Encourage an open dialogue with your patients and answer questions honestly and directly.

Additional tips:

- **Informational materials:** Provide easy-to-understand written materials or visual aids in their preferred language like those we are supplying.
- **Practice sessions:** Consider conducting PPE practice sessions to ensure proper usage, including how to safely take off PPE without contaminating oneself as this is a major contributor to infections.
- **Regular communication:** Maintain regular communication with farmworkers to address any new concerns or questions.



- **Encourage seasonal flu vaccination:** This won't prevent HPAI but can prevent co-infection with both HPAI and seasonal flu, which may be more serious and increase the risk of viral mutations.

By initiating these conversations, you can empower your patients to take proactive steps to protect themselves and their communities from HPAI.