

## Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A(H5N1) and Cats

Updated: August 23, 2024

**WHAT:** Highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) A(H5N1) has been circulating on dairy and poultry operations in the United States. Cats are susceptible to this virus and may be at increased risk given their consumption of raw milk, infected birds and infected mice. The disease may manifest as a severe neurologic syndrome (encephalomyelitis) or respiratory disease and has been fatal in cats. Other clinical signs may include fever, inappetence, lethargy, and conjunctivitis. It is currently unknown if milder disease also occurs in cats.

**WHERE:** Several cats in Canada and many in the US have been identified as having been infected with HPAI A(H5N1), and the virus has been detected in wild birds, wild animals and poultry farms in Canada.

**BUT:** Avian influenza infection is rare in cats and is not often included as a differential diagnosis for cats presenting with acute neurological disease, respiratory disease or sudden death.

**THEREFORE:** Veterinarians should include HPAI A(H5N1) as a differential diagnosis for any cat with acute neurological signs, respiratory signs or sudden death, that has outdoor access where A(H5N1) is circulating in wild birds and wildlife in the area, especially cats that have exposure to dairy operations, poultry operations or wild birds. These cats should be tested, and practitioners are encouraged to contact their provincial Office of the Chief Veterinary Officer or their local CFIA district office if suspicion of HPAI A(H5N1) is high.

**Rabies** should always be considered in mammals presenting with neurological signs. Follow your provincial procedures for reporting when rabies is suspected.

**Infection control** is important as HPAI A(H5N1) is contagious and zoonotic. High-risk pets should be examined, treated and tested in a separate room or in isolation with limited staff exposure. Use personal protective equipment (i.e. gloves, goggles, mask), proper hand washing, and surface disinfection.

**Initial testing** is conducted using Influenza A matrix PCR:

- **Antemortem:** Submit nasal and/or oropharyngeal swabs.
- **Postmortem:** Submit swabs OR the head OR the whole carcass for testing (including histopathology, if applicable).
- When applicable, discuss sampling for HPAI A(H5N1) with your provincial rabies program.

**Synthetic swabs** should be transported using universal or viral transport media. If this media is not available, break the swab off into a red top tube with a drop of sterile saline. DO NOT use bacterial transport gels or cotton swabs. Contact your diagnostic laboratory to confirm that they have the test available and verify the correct submission process.

**Reporting:** HPAI A(H5N1) in Canada in any animal species is a federally reportable disease and veterinarians are responsible for reporting to the CFIA. The lab will report non-negative test findings to CFIA and will send the sample to the National Center for Foreign Animal Disease for confirmation.

**Funding:** Typically, animal owners and veterinary clinics are responsible for the costs of diagnostic testing. However, this may vary among provinces, based on the clinical suspicion of HPAI infection and likelihood of exposure. Contact your provincial regulatory agency for advice.

**CALL TO ACTION:** Veterinarians are encouraged to stay up to date by joining the CAHSS Companion Animal Surveillance Network at [www.cahss.ca](http://www.cahss.ca) or email [cahss@animalhealthcanada.ca](mailto:cahss@animalhealthcanada.ca) with inquiries.

*This document was developed with input and review from the CAHSS Companion Animal Surveillance Network, as well as representatives from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the Canadian Animal Health Surveillance Network. CAHSS is a distinct division of Animal Health Canada. We are an independent, member-driven network of networks with broad-based support from industry and governments. Working together across geographic regions, animal types, and health topics, we strive for effective, responsive, and integrated animal health in Canada.*

**Thank you for your collaboration!**