Avian Influenza and Backyard Poultry 2015

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Question: What is Avian Influenza?

Answer: Avian Influenza (AI) is a contagious type A influenza ("flu") virus of birds that occurs worldwide, and is not uncommon in wild birds of many types. Some strains of AI can mutate, and are capable of also affecting other animals and occasionally people.

Question: What kinds of Avian Influenza are there?

Answer: There are many types of AI, but in general we refer to them as low (LPAI) or highly pathogenic (HPAI) AI. LPAI is like our "low-grade" flu: it is not much of a problem, though it may cause some production losses in poultry. HPAI is a severe problem, causing severe disease and death in susceptible birds. The type of AI is more specifically referred to by its specific type of proteins: the hemagglutinin (H) type, and the neuraminidase (N) type. If a strain of AI has either the H5 or H7 type of protein, it's considered HPAI and is watched carefully.

Question: How is Avian Influenza spread?

Answer: As a flu virus, AI replicates in the respiratory and the gastrointestinal tract, so it is spread via respiratory droplets, saliva, mucus, and also via the manure. It may also be capable of airborne spread if conditions allow (for instance, when very high amounts of virus are being produced). Contaminated surfaces, feed, water, environments, and items such as tools or workers' boots can also spread the disease.

Question: Can people get Avian Influenza?

Answer: Some strains of AI are transmissible to people. H5N1 is a strain that has been found to spread from birds to people, as well as to other mammals. The potential for spread of AI to people is a reason to be cautious when handling any sick birds.

Question: Can other animals get Avian Influenza?

Answer: Rarely, animals such as marine mammals, farmed mink, ferrets, dogs and cats have been reported to be susceptible to some strains of AI. Swine are susceptible to both human and avian flu, creating a possibility of mutated flu that might put people more at risk. Co-housing pigs and chickens is not encouraged due to this risk.

Question: As a small flock owner, should I be worried about avian influenza?

Answer: Avian Influenza is only one of many diseases that can cause respiratory disease, diarrhea or death in birds. While it's not common, it doesn't hurt to review your management to make your birds "safer"; we call this biosecurity.

Question: What is biosecurity?

Answer: For the poultry owner, it's keeping chickens away from germs and germs away from chickens. Good fencing, clean coops and hen houses, hand washing and boot cleaning before and after handling birds, quarantine for new or re-entering birds to a flock are examples of biosecurity for any flock. We can learn from the recent losses due to AI in Mexico's poultry industry.

Some of the factors that may have contributed to their multiple outbreaks of AI were discussed during 2014.

- **Lack of biosecurity** indicated by finding Avian Influenza at broiler breeder farms, which should have the highest standards for biosecurity.
- **Selling AI-infected poultry litter** to fruit and vegetable growers was practiced. Many people suspect that this is the reason for repeated AI outbreaks.
- **Selling live "spent" hens.** Sometimes these birds are "recycled" by allowing them to molt and then keeping them for another egg-laying cycle. Again, this practice can perpetuate a disease problem.

Question: How can I find out where this disease is showing up?

Answer: If you would like to see an up-to-date review of AI, go to the CDC site (http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/). During 2013-15, there have been cases of highly pathogenic AI in Mexico, Europe, Canada, the US, Asia and Egypt.

Question: What can I do to protect my birds from AI?

Answer: Great biosecurity and good general health is the best protection.

- Be careful to house your birds where other birds- especially wild birds- don't have easy access.
- Use a small size mesh to keep small wild birds from visiting your poultry.
- Place feed and water containers where they don't "tempt" wild birds. For instance, place them inside a structure or away from the borders of the coop.
- If you free-range your flock, don't let your birds gather around wild bird feeders. Best not to have wild bird feeders if you have backyard poultry.
- Try to keep wild turkeys away from your poultry: use double fencing for your perimeters (birds can reach through a single fence) and create a "roof" for your coop (turkeys *can* and *do* fly).
- Don't use poultry litter on your land unless it's been well-composted.
- Buy chicks from NPIP-certified AI-free hatcheries. Try to have a uniform flock: same age, same source, same vaccination status.

Question: What about other farm animals — can they get AI?

Answer: In general, flu viruses have a way of "jumping" between certain species: notably humans, birds and pigs. While this is not a common event, it's still important to be aware of this possibility. For this reason, it's important to avoid mixing poultry and swine. It's also very important to isolate sick pigs from poultry or people, and to avoid visiting livestock fairs if you have a cold or the flu.

Question: Are there AI vaccines for birds?

Answer: Experimental vaccine of poultry against some types of avian flu has been tried, but was not very effective. There are human vaccines in development for high risk situations. In outbreak situations, the USDA may allow AI vaccination: check your state veterinarian, since this situation is likely to change.

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