Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza – Factsheet

High pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), or bird flu, is a highly contagious viral infection can affect all species of birds both wild and domestic, and has also been reported in pinnipeds – fur seals and sea lions.

Background

The H5N1 strain of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) has spread globally to all areas since December 2021 except Aotearoa, Australia, the Pacific Islands. New Zealand has never had a case of HPAI and the likelihood of it arriving on pathways that we manage is low. HPAI is currently spreading internationally in wild birds, which is the most plausible path by which it would reach New Zealand. As information emerges about the distribution of the disease in Antarctica, there will be a better understanding about the likelihood of HPAI reaching New Zealand through wild bird movements.

Once in New Zealand, it could spread by direct contact between infected and healthy birds, or through contaminated equipment and materials, including water and feed.

We are actively monitoring disease spread, particularly towards the Ross Sea region in Antarctica and globally. We're talking regularly with colleagues around the world so we can learn as much as we can about how the disease is behaving as it spreads, and what other countries are doing to manage the disease.

International experience has shown that a One Health approach to the current strain of HPAI is essential. If HPAI is detected in New Zealand or its territories, Biosecurity New Zealand will be the lead agency and will coordinate any response in partnership with the Department of Conservation (DOC) and the Ministry of Health.

Various native sea birds congregating at sea (DOC).

Species at risk

We don't know exactly what impact HPAI would have on native species but, based on overseas evidence, it's more likely to affect colony nesting birds such as red and black-billed gulls, gannets, terns and other seabirds due to the close contact transmission of the virus through secretions and faeces; and predator/scavenger species such as raptors and marine mammals.

Transmission to mammals

Any animal that eats or interacts with infected birds and/or mammals is at risk of catching HPAI. Various mammals have caught HPAI, with variable rates of susceptibility and mortality.

Mammalian infections significant to Aotearoa are mortalities in species of: sealions, seals, porpoises, canines, felines, and mustelids.

Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

June 2024 DOC-7543678

New Zealand Government

Alan Tennyson among white-napped petrels, Macauley Island, Nov 1988 (DOC).

What to look out for?

While there are many other possible causes of illness and death in wild birds, be aware of HPAI so you can minimise risks to yourselves and other animals if you encounter sick or dead birds.

The most obvious sign of HPAI is sudden death in several birds. Other signs can include weakness, tremors, paralysis, difficulty breathing, lack of co-ordination, blindness, trembling and diarrhoea.

If you see three or more sick or dead wild birds in a group, report it immediately to Biosecurity New Zealand's Exotic Pest and Disease Hotline on 0800 80 99 66. Provide as much detail to Biosecurity New Zealand as you can, including:

- a GPS reading or other precise location information
- photographs and/or videos of sick and dead birds
- species identity and estimate of numbers affected
- note how many are sick or freshly dead, and the total number present.

Biosecurity New Zealand will take details and an incursion investigator will be in contact with you. Follow any instructions from Biosecurity New Zealand for handling of sick or dead birds.

The World Health Organisation states HPAI has a 50% mortality rate in humans, though cases are very rare. Do not handle sick or dead birds if you suspect HPAI.

Management Options

Management options are limited, this is not an eradicable disease. Effective management targets population support through the species recovery programmes; focussing on increasing baseline health and increasing population resilience.

For a few species, using vaccination might be an effective tool during outbreaks to protect a core breeding population to prevent species extinction.

In early 2024, DOC began a trial to assess the safety and efficacy of the vaccine in the five species:

- Kakī (Black stilt)
- Takahē
- Kākāpō
- Tūturuatu (Shore plover)
- Red-crowned kākāriki (as a surrogate species for kākāriki karaka/orange-fronted kākāriki)

It is not possible to vaccinate all our endangered birds, but we can focus on those species in captivity where the full two doses of vaccine can be given.

Attachments and links

DOC website: *www.doc.govt.nz/our-work/wildlife-health/avian-influenza/*

MPI website: *www.mpi.govt.nz/biosecurity/pests-and-diseases-not-in-new-zealand/animal-diseases-not-in-nz/high-pathogenicity-avian-influenza-and-the-risk-to-nz/*

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