



Protocols for Testing Cats or Dogs with Compatible Clinical Illness and Risk Factors for H5N1 in New Jersey

Date: January 22, 2025

Public Health Message Type: Alert Advisory Update Information

Intended Audience: All public health partners Healthcare providers Infection preventionists
 Local health departments Schools/child care centers ACOs
 Animal health professionals Other:

Key Points or Updates:

- (1) H5N1 testing is available at the NJ Department of Agriculture's Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory (NJAHDL) for cats or dogs with **compatible clinical signs and risk factors for exposure** to H5N1 (see Information for Veterinarians below).
- (2) Cats are susceptible to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) A (H5N1) and may become infected via ingesting contaminated raw meat, raw dairy products, or via exposure to infected animals. Severe illness and death may occur. New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) previously sent out a LINCS message on the risk of H5N1 to cats from exposure to contaminated raw milk or raw/undercooked meat (including raw pet food)- this LINCS message can be accessed at <https://phm.njlincs.net/Message/GetMessageContent?messageId=112676>
- (3) H5N1 can also be transmitted to dogs, but there have not been any cases of H5N1 reported in the United States at this time, and they may have a lower risk and milder illness/lower mortality rates compared to infected cats.
- (4) There have not been any reported cases of H5N1 in cats in New Jersey.
- (5) NJDOH and New Jersey Department of Agriculture (NJDA), Division of Animal Health are sending out this additional guidance to provide veterinarians with information on how to request H5N1 testing and collect specimens for cats or dogs with compatible clinical illness and risk factors for H5N1 exposure.
- (6) H5N1 virus, also known as "bird flu," is circulating globally in wild birds. In the United States, it is causing outbreaks in poultry, and more recently in dairy cows. Bird flu has not been detected in New Jersey dairy cattle as of the date of this message and there have been no recent detections in NJ poultry, with the last detection in poultry being in 2023. There have been presumptive positive detections in wild birds in 2025.
- (7) Bird flu is a zoonotic disease that has also caused [sporadic infections in people](#)- but no human-to-human transmission has been documented in the United States.

Information for Veterinarians

- **Clinical signs** of H5N1 in cats or dogs may include the following:
 - General: loss of appetite lethargy, depression, fever
 - Neurologic signs (e.g. ataxia, circling, tremors, seizures, blindness),
 - Respiratory signs (oculonasal discharge, tachypnea, dyspnea, sneezing, coughing)
- **Risk factors for exposure** include the following:
 - Consumption of raw (unpasteurized) milk or dairy products
 - Consumption of raw or undercooked meat (including raw commercial pet food)

- Known exposure to wild birds, poultry, or other animals infected with H5N1
- Contaminated fomites may also serve as a source of exposure (such as exposure to a farm/premise with infected animals or contact with contaminated clothing/materials from a person that was on an affected premise)
- H5N1 testing is available at the NJDA's New Jersey Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory (NJAHDL) for cats or dogs with **compatible clinical signs and risk factors for exposure** to H5N1. Veterinarians should email zoonoticrn@doh.nj.gov and jerseyvetlab@ag.nj.gov to request testing. Veterinarians are also advised to consider and pursue diagnostic testing for other potential differential diagnoses.
- Review the CDC [recommendations](#) for veterinarians and veterinary staff that are working with suspected or confirmed-positive animals for H5N1 bird flu. Staff should wear the [recommended PPE](#) and follow additional CDC guidance to limit human exposure to animals with suspected H5N1.
 - Veterinarians that work with domestic poultry, livestock, or wild birds should ensure that they follow all reporting requirements and review guidance from [NJDA Division of Animal Health](#) (domestic poultry, livestock) and [NJ Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Fish and Wildlife](#) (wild birds).
- **Specimen Collection:**
 - A nasal or nasopharyngeal sample (preferred sample) should be collected for H5N1 testing in a cat or dog with compatible clinical signs and risk factors. A cotton or dacron or another synthetic swab in viral transport media or BHI broth or 2-3 ml of sterile saline is recommended. Please do not use wooden handle swabs. If a nasal/nasopharyngeal sample cannot be obtained, a few ml of urine sample may also be submitted for testing in a sterile tube.
 - The sample should be refrigerated and submitted to the lab as soon as possible.
 - Please complete and submit a general submission form to the NJDA Animal Health Diagnostic Lab, which is available here: <https://www.nj.gov/agriculture/ahdl/library/General%20Specimen%20Submission%20Form-1130-5.pdf>
 - Preliminary testing will be performed at the NJDA Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory- all presumptive positive specimens will be sent to the USDA National Veterinary Services Laboratory for confirmatory testing.
- **Sample Submission Instructions**, including the laboratory address, can be found at [Animal Health Diagnostic Lab | Mailing Instructions](#).
- H5N1 testing can also be conducted on raw pet food or raw milk.
- USDA-National Animal Health Laboratory Network will cover the cost of H5 testing in clinical cats or dogs based on a risk assessment, and FDA Vet-LIRN may cover testing of raw pet food based on risk assessment.

Information for Local health departments:

- If local health departments receive calls from residents about sick cats or dogs with suspected H5N1, residents should be advised to seek care from a veterinarian. Local health departments

should contact NJDOH if they receive calls from veterinarians about cats or dogs with suspected H5N1.

- Advise residents or veterinarians to immediately report sick or unexplained deaths in domestic poultry, or suspected cases of H5N1 in livestock, to the NJDA, Division of Animal Health at 609-671-6400 or state.veterinarian@ag.nj.gov. Additional information and recommendations for veterinarians and owners of poultry or dairy cattle can be found on the [NJDA website](#).
- Advise residents or veterinarians to report sick or dead wild birds to the [NJ Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Fish and Wildlife](#) hotline at 1-877-WARNDEP.

Contact Information:

- To reach the NJDOH Communicable Disease Service, contact Zoonoticrn@doh.nj.gov or (609) 826-4872 during business hours
- Contact information for the NJDA Animal Health Diagnostic Laboratory can be found at <https://www.nj.gov/agriculture/ahdl/contact/>.

References and Resources:

- https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/novel_flu.shtml
- <https://www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/ah/>
- [Considerations for Veterinarians: Evaluating and Handling of Cats Potentially Exposed to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A\(H5N1\) Virus | Bird Flu | CDC](#)
- [FDA Outlines Ways to Reduce Risk of HPAI in Cats | FDA](#)
- [Cat and Dog Food Manufacturers Required to Consider H5N1 in Food Safety Plans | FDA](#)
- [Avian influenza A \(H5N1\) in cats | American Veterinary Medical Association](#)
- [Avian influenza in pets and backyard flocks | American Veterinary Medical Association](#)
- [Reducing Risk for People Working with or Exposed to Animals | Bird Flu | CDC](#)
- <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections>