

Could Your Cat Be Carrying This Hidden Health Threat?

Household cats are now affected by this illness; reports say it could also be passed on to humans. Is your pet protected enough from this alarming disease?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Recent reports show bird flu (H5N1) can infect cats, with over 80 confirmed cases since 2022, highlighting a concerning health threat for household pets and possible transmission risk to humans
- Cats commonly contract bird flu through contact with infected farm animals, wild birds, rodents or by consuming contaminated raw meat and unpasteurized milk, including commercial frozen pet foods
- Although rare, cat-to-human transmission could occur due to close interactions, such as sleeping together or sharing living spaces, increasing the need for vigilance among pet owners regarding bird flu
- Controversy arose after the CDC removed data on potential feline-to-human transmission of H5N1, raising concerns among scientists about transparency and public awareness of this zoonotic risk
- Protect your cat and family by recognizing symptoms like neurological issues, isolating infected pets, practicing strict hygiene, and promptly reporting suspected bird flu cases to veterinarians and local health authorities

According to recent reports, the bird flu doesn't just affect birds — it can spread to other animals as well, including mammals and companion animals, particularly felines.¹ Since 2022, more than 80 household cats have been confirmed to have bird flu, particularly the H5N1 strain, according to a report from ABC News.² Some of the infected pets died from the disease.

As a pet parent, keeping informed about this potential health risk is essential. Awareness of bird flu helps you safeguard your cat's health and protects your own well-being.

What Is H5N1 and How Does It Spread to Pets?

Also known as avian influenza, bird flu primarily affects wild migratory birds and domestic poultry. However, the H5N1 strain, although adapted primarily to birds, has been circulating in dairy cattle since early 2024. There are also cases of it occurring in humans. According to a New York Times article:

*"H5N1 has also infected at least 67 Americans but does not yet have the ability to spread readily among people. Only one American, in Louisiana, has died of an H5N1 infection so far."*³

Generally, most cases of bird flu in cats have been seen in those exposed to farm animals — for example, barn cats that live in dairy farms, where they are in close contact with cows that may be infected. In fact, in some farms, sudden death in cats is one indication that bird flu is spreading among the cattle.⁴

Some pets may acquire the infection when allowed to roam outside and catch infected rodents or diseased wild birds. These are the primary carriers of bird flu, and they spread the virus through their droppings or saliva — when a cat eats or even just plays with an infected bird, it can become ill. If your cat frequently spends time outdoors, they could be unknowingly exposed to this virus.

However, recent reports say that some house cats also get this illness from eating raw, contaminated meats or drinking unpasteurized milk. One example was in 2024, when a "strictly indoor cat" contracted the virus after consuming a frozen turkey product.⁵ According to the Oregon Department of Agriculture, "[T]ests confirmed a genetic match between the virus in the raw and frozen pet food and the infected cat."⁶

Can H5N1 Pass from Cats to Humans?

While it may seem unlikely for bird flu to be transmitted from household cats to humans, it's not impossible, considering how much we tend to snuggle and sleep in bed with our cats. According to ABC News:

"Companion animals, and especially cats, are 100% a public health risk in terms of the risk of zoonotic transmission to people," said virologist Angela Rasmussen, who studies disease progression in emerging viruses at the University of Saskatchewan's Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization.

*This is because we snuggle with and sleep in bed with our cats. When we're not looking, cats drink from our water glasses and walk on kitchen counters. So, cat owners should be aware of the ongoing spread of bird flu. 'By reducing the risk to your cats, you reduce the risk to yourself,' Rasmussen said."*⁷

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also acknowledges that there have been previous cases when bird flu has been transmitted to humans from other animals, saying:

*"There have been some instances in the United States where avian influenza viruses have spread from mammals to people; examples include from cats in 2016 and from cows in 2024."*⁸

CDC Takes Down Data Showing Possible Feline to Human Transmission of H5N1

An article from the New York Times⁹ has called out the CDC for removing data that shows the possibility that cats with bird flu can spread the virus to humans and vice versa. The data, part of the agency's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, appeared online briefly but vanished, meaning it could have been "mistakenly posted."

However, the NYT article notes that the report is valuable, as it contains crucial information about the risks of bird flu to people and pets. A copy of the data they obtained talked about a case where an infected cat spread the virus to another feline, as well as a human adolescent. The cat passed away four days after symptoms began. Another case involved an infected dairy farmworker with symptoms; a cat became ill two days later. The cat passed away on the third day. According to the article:

"If there is new evidence about H5N1 that is being held up for political purposes, that is just completely at odds with what government's responsibility is, which is to protect the American people," said Jennifer Nuzzo, director of the Pandemic Center at the Brown University School of Public Health.

It was important that the C.D.C. immediately publish the full data and the context in which they were collected for other scientists to review, she said.

'Given the number of cats in the U.S. and the close contact with people, there is definitely a need to understand the potential risk,' said Dr. Diego Diel, a veterinarian and virologist at Cornell University."¹⁰

Strategies to Protect Your Cat's and Your Family's Health

Although experts haven't confirmed whether bird flu can pass from cats to humans, you can best protect yourself by staying vigilant about your cat's health.

Bird flu often affects a cat's nervous system, causing them to behave oddly or lose coordination. Symptoms also include runny nose and eye discharge. A runny nose and eye discharge are also symptoms. In some cases, the condition can cause seizures and dizziness, which people may mistake for rabies. Promptly, addressing these changes can improve your pet's chances of recovery.

If you suspect your cat might have bird flu, isolate them from other pets and family members, and then contact your veterinarian immediately for advice and testing. If there's a confirmed bird flu outbreak in your area, it's a good idea to notify your local health authorities to help prevent the virus from spreading further.

If your cat (or any pet in your household) is sick, it's also vital to protect yourself by practicing good hygiene. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling your pet and after preparing their meals. Don't let your cat lick your face; wear gloves and a mask when cleaning their bedding or litter box. You should also disinfect surfaces your cat regularly touches using all-natural cleaning solutions. These simple steps can dramatically reduce your risk of catching the virus from your pet.

Sources and References

^{1,8} [CDC Avian Influenza \(Bird Flu\), January 7, 2025](#)

^{2,5,7} [ABC News, February 11, 2025](#)

^{3,4,9,10} [The New York Times, February 6, 2025](#)

⁶ [Oregon Department of Agriculture, December 26, 2024](#)
