

Avian influenza in cats – ECDC advice for avoiding exposure of humans

Background

A dead cat in northern Germany has been found to be infected with the A/H5N1 avian influenza virus.

- This is no surprise. Felines are known to be susceptible and sensitive to the virus. Less is known about the ability of an infected cat to pass on the virus.
- The fact that the cat was discovered and diagnosed shows good veterinary surveillance.
- This finding does not imply any change in the virus.
- It should be underlined that no human cases have been associated with exposure to felines, and no outbreaks of A/H5N1 in cats have been reported even though sporadic infections have been reported in Asia and Iraq.
- However, exposure to virus from an infected cat in the household could be substantially greater than, for example, the exposure from just picking up a dead bird infected with A/H5N1.

Note: The advice below is provisional and builds on current and incomplete knowledge. It may well have to be revised within a short time, as more data on the epidemiological situation and on the actual risk appear. The issue of risk of infection from cats (and other pets) is presently under consideration in the ECDC Scientific Panel on avian influenza.

Provisional ECDC Advice – 2 March 2006

The following advice should generally be applied within the surveillance area (10 km radius of a verified A/H5N1 infection in birds). The extent of this area may have to be modified after a local risk assessment.

- Keep domestic cats inside the house to avoid exposure to potentially infected birds
- Keep semi-domestic or stray cats outside the house and avoid contact with them
- If a cat brings a sick or dead bird into the house, put on ordinary gloves and dispose of the bird as recommended by your Department of Agriculture
- If your cat is sick and has potentially been in contact with birds, contact the local veterinary authorities
- Notify dead cats to the local veterinary department

There are also hygiene rules that apply in general, regardless of any risk of A/H5N1 infection:

- Wear gloves when cleaning cat litter and wash hands afterwards
- Do not touch dead animals. If you must, wash your hands afterwards
- Always wash hands before handling food

Also note that washing hands with soap and water and washing clothes at recommended temperature with an ordinary detergent is enough to destroy influenza virus.