



## Avian Influenza

### What we know about it, and how to mitigate its effects on our flocks

You'll remember that we'd been waiting for the official departments to get a wiggle on with communicating some definitive information about Avian Influenza (AI), how it impacts us backyard keepers, how it spreads and what we're required to do to limit its effect. We decided to get on with it ourselves... you know how it goes; if you want something done, ask a busy person.

When we were planning this article, we asked you to take part in a survey to tell us about yourselves, your thoughts on various aspects of Avian Influenza and how it affects you and your flock. Nearly 400 of you took part (thank YOU!!!) and this gave us a lot of useful data to work with, so that we can understand what you know, what you want to know and how you feel about it. This gave us the framework for this article in terms of what information and support you would find useful.

#### **Here are a couple of interesting snippets from your data.....**

- The survey showed that in The Hen House community, chicken keepers are 85% female, 12% males. 81% of participants are aged between 35 and 65, with all participants reporting as living within mainland UK and Northern Ireland. I had that age group wrong; I thought it would be weighted about 5 years younger. I just sneak in though!
- This snippet of data really interested me as I hadn't really thought about the group's qualifications before: 73% of participants held further or higher education qualifications with 58% of participants being graduates and with a further 15% holding a technical or trade qualification. 1% of participants reported holding no formal qualifications. Occupation was also similar, with 70% of participants reporting their current or former occupation before retirement being one of management, professional or skilled trade. 2% of participants reported as being unemployed, which is less than half the national unemployment rate of 4.2%.

We are also publishing Nigel's report on all YOUR data, which will appear alongside this article

Nigel Swift has been looking at your answers to the questions to identify your areas of concern and need; we'd like to be able to answer all your questions, and provide support where needed. Here goes.....

#### **Avian Influenza – what is it?**

I was mightily relieved when I saw that 91% of you understand that it is a virus, and 65% know that "There are many different types of Avian Influenza, and some are more deadly than others".

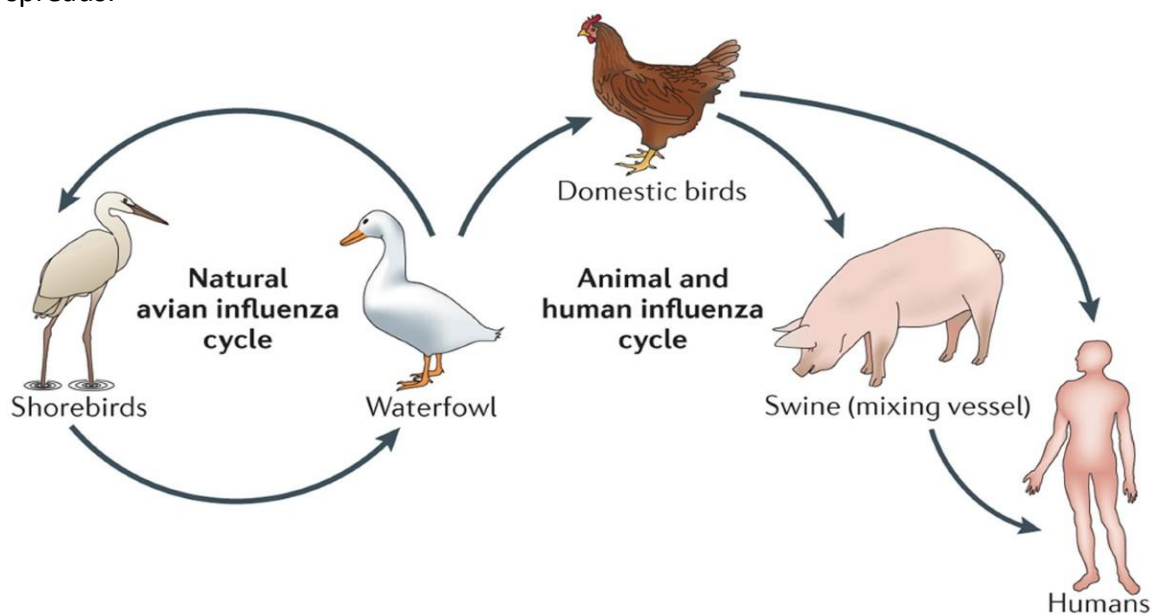
Here is a little more information to set the scene; I am a firm believer in education and understanding helping us deal with a situation.

Here is the official definition of the group of viruses: “Avian influenza, also known as avian flu or bird flu, is a disease caused by the influenza A virus, which primarily affects birds but can sometimes affect mammals **including humans**. Wild aquatic birds are the primary host of the influenza A virus, which is enzootic (regularly affecting animals in a particular district or at a particular season) in many bird populations”.

So.... we know that it is spread to the UK via migratory birds, that there are various forms of the virus, some worse than others, and that it can spread to other mammals such as seals, foxes, other prey animals, and cattle (and so potentially into our food chain, which is a worry!).

In the past it was restricted to a ‘flu season; arriving in the UK with the migratory birds around September-October and then leaving our shores around February the following year. Although the ‘big AI lockdown’ of 2021-22 lasted from October through to May, and while the worst of the risk had gone that spring, the virus remained in our waterfowl and seabirds – those along the eastern seaboard being the worst affected. The most worrying part of this was that this variant was H5N1, which can be transmitted to humans. There have been a few isolated cases of human-to-human transmission; these cases are rare, and at present H5N1 isn’t considered a serious pandemic risk to humans, although it definitely has the potential in theory to be one. So, while it isn’t yet easily transmissible **between** humans, this is entirely possible and would potentially bring about a pandemic much worse than Covid.

**How can our flocks catch it?** The virus can be spread or tracked into their run by microscopic particles of infected bird faeces on the bottom of our boots, by direct contact with wild bird faeces or contact with rainwater run-off that contains wild bird faeces. There are a good many other forms of contamination, but these are the main ones that concern us for now. Here’s a good infographic (from Nature Reviews) which helps to explain how it spreads:



Nature Reviews | Microbiology

Hence, not only is Avian Influenza (AI) a threat to our chickens, but it can also be a threat to us if we’re in close proximity to an infected bird. What does alarm me is that it is now

spreading into mammals, and in particular ones which **form a part of our food chain**. I think that some of us are reminded of the impact that Covid had on the supply of our food, and this brings the potential of AI into stark context. There was plenty of food available during Covid, the problem was with the logistics of getting it out to supermarkets, but during an AI pandemic there could certainly be shortages of chicken and other food items.

[This article](#) is well worth reading if you like a bit of balanced background information.

### **What can we do about it?**

The main weapon that we can bring into play is careful biosecurity, coupled with keeping our birds in a covered run and protected from contact with wild birds, waterfowl and their faeces. Some of you will remember my thread and video on [The Hen House](#) on this, demonstrating the requirements to protect your flocks. If we have a lockdown, then your birds **must be under cover 24/7, to protect them until the order is lifted**.

A solid roof is best for keeping the run dry – partly because in the winter months a wet run will create a reservoir of pathogens and parasites, but mainly to protect your flock from rainwater run-off contaminated with bird faeces that could carry the virus. Everyone has adapted the concept to their own situation, but the main standards to base yours on are: weldmesh with gaps of no more than ½” to prevent any wild birds and vermin from getting in, with a solid or tarpaulin roof. Clear tarpaulins that roll down the sides of the run (like roller blinds) will stop the sideways rain that can soak a run. The beauty of using this system is that the ‘blinds’ can be rolled up or down depending on the weather forecast.

If you have a lot of birds, then splitting them between 2 medium-sized runs rather than one big one will lessen the chance of bullying and make it easier to clean out. The smaller runs will also be much more resistant to the heavy winds and storms that we’ve been getting in recent winters.

In terms of practical biosecurity, take care not to transfer any contamination into the run on your feet. So use either a lidded foot dip of an anti-viral disinfectant such as [Virocur](#) outside, or a separate pair of shoes/clogs inside the run to step into (just over 40% of you told us that you already have this set-up for lockdown). Use Virocur to disinfect anything that you are bringing into the run from your garden – I put some in a spray bottle for this... super-easy to use. With your hens being confined to the run for long periods, take care to sanitise the run litter twice a week, and muck it out more frequently too.

There are some members of The Hen House group with past experience of lockdowns, and the admin team is always happy to help with practical advice on biosecurity and run construction

**Avian Influenza outbreak alerts:** you can register for either text or email alerts as the outbreaks happen – this is an especially helpful warning of the progression of outbreaks and helps you to prepare your set-up for an impending lockdown. We will also post these alerts on The Hen House. Register for alerts here

[https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKAPHA/subscriber/new?qsp=CODE\\_RED](https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKAPHA/subscriber/new?qsp=CODE_RED)

**Registering your flock:** A reassuringly high number (56%-70% depending on age group) of you understood, and agreed with, the need to register your flocks. A lot of you had already done so, or were intending to register before the deadline. Fab news!

From October 1<sup>st</sup> 2024, it will be law to register your flock, even if you have less than 50 birds. This is to help DEFRA to identify and pinpoint outbreaks more effectively, ensuring that only poultry keepers in that immediate area need to keep their flocks under cover when necessary. [This article](#) from the poultry trade press explains it well.

**Links for registering your flock:**

Less than 50 birds: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/.../Voluntary...>

More than 50 birds: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/.../Compulsory...>

Registering takes just a few minutes, and you will receive confirmation by post. There is no sinister undertone to this registration (I wouldn't be doing it if there was!) it is to help the government to contain the spread of the virus more effectively. There will be no 'mass culling of domestic flocks' as some keyboard warriors would like us to think; unless your birds are infected, there will just be a courtesy visit to flocks near an outbreak to take test samples from your birds and check on your biosecurity.

There is no indication that DEFRA or APHA will be charging to register our birds (yet another internet myth). I very much doubt that they will spend time and money on the infrastructure to administer that!

Here are some questions that came up in the survey, which I'd like to answer, and hopefully allay any worries:

**Q:** my flock are all pet birds, and are kept under cover and confined during lockdown, if a local commercial farm or shoot has an outbreak, will DEFRA come and cull my birds?

**A:** Provided that your flock isn't infected – you'd know if they were as they'd be dying very quickly – you have nothing to worry about. There will be a visit from 'the folks in white suits' to take samples from your birds (this takes a few minutes) and to discuss biosecurity with you. If you are following the regime above, then you have nothing to worry about.

**Q:** How does my flock of a couple of chickens pose a threat? They can't spread bird flu.

**A:** Our domestic flocks are a link in the chain of infection shown in the diagram above; we need to keep them safe (and by default our families too as we have close contact with them). Keeping them under cover and registering your flock will mean that you are doing your best to keep them safe. Awareness of the progression of outbreaks will really help too, so register for the alerts to your phone or email.

**Q:** I am worried that the government will come and take my chickens away if I register them.

**A:** The government really won't be taking anyone's chickens away – there's no reason to. If your flock has Avian Influenza, then they will probably already have succumbed; all APHA will do is take away the carcasses and make sure that they are disposed of properly. If your flock is healthy and under cover, then you have nothing to worry about. If your chickens test

positive to AI, the horrible reality is that if nature takes its course, they will die from bird flu. This is a short but painful and unpleasant way to die. Putting an animal to sleep to spare their suffering is the humane thing to do but this would be done ONLY if they tested positive, and the chances are that by then you would be able to see how poorly they were.

I anticipate that this will be the first in a series of articles about Avian Influenza, please feel free to get in touch with your thoughts and questions – we will be looking deeper into the scientific facts around AI, and how we are reacting to the recommendations.

We are happy for you to share this article in its entirety, but not to quote any sections out of context.

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<https://www.facebook.com/groups/th3henhouse>

[YouTube channel](#)

The recommendations in this guide are given without any guarantees on the part of Clare Taylor.

If in doubt, seek the advice of a specialist chicken vet – our map of poultry vets is here [www.claretaylor.com/health](http://www.claretaylor.com/health).