

Bird Flu and Cats

By Cathy Lund, DVM

The sharp upswing in bird flu cases across the country is creating a real health risk for our domestic cats.

Cats are uniquely susceptible to H5N1, or avian influenza. Many other animals can become infected, but cats are exquisitely sensitive to picking up infections. Because of this, farm cats who have become sick or even died as a result of infection can serve as an indicator for the presence of bird flu in a barn or community. Massive levels of the virus can be found in the milk of infected cows, and those cats who became ill after drinking virus-contaminated raw milk, or contacting infected birds, were sometimes the first sign farmers had that a bird flu outbreak was happening.

There have been more than 50 confirmed cases of bird flu in cats since the beginning of the viral outbreak in March of 2024, and these cats typically became infected from consuming unpasteurized milk or raw meats, or by eating raw pet foods that have been contaminated by the highly-pathogenic H5N1 virus.

Federal officials say that the cats who became ill after eating commercially available raw pet foods were the first bird flu cases in the country linked to contaminated pet food. Because bird flu is inactivated by heating or pasteurization, cooked pet foods, even if they have been exposed to the virus, are not considered dangerous for cats.

And exposure can also happen when cats are around contaminated materials. Cats who come into contact with secretions or droppings from infected birds are at risk for becoming infected themselves. Exposure can also occur when cats lap up water from ponds used by infected ducks and other water fowl.

According to federal regulations, if bird flu is identified in commercial poultry farms, all those animals must be killed and they cannot be used in any food products. However, early or mild infections are frequently not detected readily, and if those animals go to slaughter, their meat can enter the food supply. This is how raw pet foods can become contaminated with the bird flu virus.

The US Food and Drug Administration recently announced new rules for food safety plans that are designed to minimize the likelihood of viral contamination in raw or unpasteurized food products for pets, but it is unclear if those guidelines will have any far-reaching effects.

Raw diets for pets have always posed health risks from potential contaminants, and bird flu is just the latest in a long list of worrisome problems. Feeding heat-processed diets will eliminate the risk of bird flu, but cat owners who are reluctant to switch to commercially cooked or processed foods can increase the safety of the raw diets by home cooking them before feeding

those diets to their cats. They can also limit their choice of raw food diets to those manufactured by companies that require frequent bird flu flock testing by their suppliers.

Outside cats who hunt and consume birds may contract the virus through that hunting behavior, so limiting a cat's contact with birds, or keeping cats indoors, will help enhance their safety.

Clinical signs in infected cats range from decreased appetite and lethargy to neurological signs, including seizures and ataxia (lack of coordination). Respiratory signs, such as sneezing, coughing and nasal discharge, also frequently occur. Mortality rates can be as high as 65%, but as with most viruses, some infections can be quite mild.

It is possible for infected cats to transmit the virus to humans, but the risk is very low, and there have been no verified cases of people becoming sick from infected cats. Dogs can also become infected with bird flu, although they appear to be less susceptible than cats and their illnesses are not as severe.