



HIGH PATHOGENICITY (H5N1) AVIAN INFLUENZA IN THE WESTERN CAPE

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. What strain of Avian Influenza is causing the death of the sea birds?

The strain is assumed to be the same clade 2.3.4.4 H5N1 strain that has been present in South Africa since April this year. The testing to confirm is still in progress. The clade number is used to distinguish it from a different H5N1 strain found elsewhere in the world since 1997.

2. Where did the virus originate?

Eurasia. The H5N8 “grandparent” was found in Russia in 2016 and this H5N1 strain has developed from that one and other low pathogenicity viruses.

3. Is it a new virus?

Yes, it was first detected in Europe in 2020, though it is closely related to AI viruses that have been around for the last 5 years or so.

4. How does the virus spread and how quickly?

The virus is present in faeces and in the fluids in the mouth and nose of infected birds, as well as in tissues of dead birds. It's spread by direct contact with these fluids and tissues, and in aerosols (sneezing). It can also be transported on contaminated objects (vehicle tyres, shoes, clothes).

We don't know how quickly the virus spreads in wild birds. It probably differs between species and is a very complex question to investigate. In chickens, it can kill all in a house within 1-2 weeks, if allowed to spread, but the conditions are very different in the wild.

5. Which bird species have been affected?

In **Western Cape**, Lab-confirmed cases in:

Domestic chickens, turkeys, geese and ostriches

Cape cormorants

Cape gannets

White-breasted cormorants

African sacred ibis

African penguin (2)

Kelp gull

Hartlaub's gull

Great white pelican

Egyptian goose

Spur-winged-goose



Blue crane

Yellow-billed duck

African fish eagle

Brown skua

6. Are any of the birds species on the endangered list?

African penguins, Cape cormorants, Cape gannets

Bank cormorants look similar to Cape cormorants and are very rare (only 5000 left) so we could miss the disease in this species.

7. How do you contain the spread of the virus?

In wild birds, all we can do is try to reduce the amount of virus in the environment by disposing of carcasses and removing sick birds and euthanizing them.

8. Do you know at this stage how many birds have been killed by this virus?

As of 28 October, since approx. 12 October, just over 15 000 birds have been counted as sick or dead, along the Western Cape coastline, mostly Cape cormorants. We have no way of knowing how many died at sea or on beaches that people have not accessed or reported from.

9. What will it mean to the species in the long term?

It's too early to tell, but given that the South African Cape cormorant breeding population was estimated to be 100 000 birds and the number lost equates to 15%, it is expected to be very damaging.

10. Does this virus only kill wild sea birds or are poultry (farm animals) also at risk?

Yes, domestic poultry are at risk and it is probably more pathogenic to chickens. Twenty-three poultry and ostrich farms have already been affected this year in the Western Cape and 60 in South Africa. The latest was infected about 2 weeks ago.

11. Is there a danger that the virus will spread to the human population or to other animals, e.g.seals, dogs?

There is a small chance that individual mammals could be infected (though not necessarily get sick), which is why people are asked not to touch carcasses and to wear gloves and masks, but it is not considered an imminent danger. No avian influenza has been known to gain the capability to spread from human to human.

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