

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza- zoonotic but not vector-borne

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The hot topic for the past few years has been the viral disease called highly pathogenic avian influenza or HPAI, commonly known as 'Bird Flu'. This disease is carried by wild waterfowl which spread it through their droppings. Jamaica is classified as AI free as there has been no evidence of its presence here. The fact that we are an island makes it difficult for diseases to enter our country as easily as in other places that may border on an infected zone.



With the emergence of the H5N1 strain in Hong Kong in 1997, confirmed transmission to humans became an issue. Transmission was linked to direct contact with infected chickens in the live-bird markets and on farms. Subsequently it spread to many countries via the migration of wild birds.

It is important to know: HPAI is not transmissible to humans through consumption of cooked and ready-to-eat poultry products. Any possibility of infection has to do with personnel closely associated with the growth and production of live chickens, or those handling dead infected birds.



More recently a new strain has emerged in parts North America – H5N2 – which so far has shown no transmission to humans.

HPAI can be introduced to Jamaica by the importation of infected birds or bird products or by infected migrating birds. Import restrictions can prevent the former, but our avian winter visitors cannot be kept out. It is the duty of both large corporations and responsible small and backyard growers of poultry (not limited to chickens but also duck and turkey growers) to ensure they are familiar with the signs of HPAI in their flocks. Respiratory disease, diarrhea, swollen combs, and rapid death are basic signs. If ever there is any suspicion of such a disease, the veterinary authorities must be contacted *immediately* so that proper diagnosis and containment/quarantine procedures can be initiated. Protection of our local poultry industry is critical for food security of our island.

Prevention is better than cure, and proper biosecurity practices can aid in protecting your flock. Effective cleaning and sanitation of housing and equipment between flocks, good husbandry and secure housing to prevent direct contact between wild birds and your flock are essential together with regular veterinary health checks. These measures along with general responsible farm management will go a long way to keep our country AI free.