

Selected questions and answers relating to hygiene of food and consumables in times of the bird flu - How can I protect myself and my family?

Updated FAQ dated 16. March 2022

Concerned persons are asking whether poultry and poultry products can become contaminated with the bird flu virus (various subtypes of the avian influenza virus including H5N1 and H5N8). Here, the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment provides answers to these questions.

Generally, the transmission of the pathogen via infected food cannot be ruled out. However, infections of humans with the bird flu virus are rare, and direct and close contact with infected birds appears to be the main transmission route between birds and humans. The BfR does not have any data verifying that humans have been infected and became ill after ingestion of food that was contaminated with the bird flu virus.

As the virus is sensitive to high temperatures, food that has been well cooked is safe. Meat is considered well cooked, if all sides and the core reach a temperature of at least 70°C for 2 minutes. This is evident when the poultry meat is no longer red or pink and no red juices are leaking out.

So far, there is no evidence suggesting that humans can be infected by raw eggs or raw sausage products containing poultry meat from infected animals. However, it has been proven that eggs of infected animals can contain the virus both on the shell and also in the egg white and yolk. As a precaution, anyone who wants to protect themselves against bird flu viruses and other pathogens that are possibly present in eggs and egg products, should not consume raw egg products (whipped egg whites, tiramisu, etc.). The egg white and egg yolk of boiled eggs should be solid.

What is bird flu?

The highly pathogenic avian influenza (bird flu, classical fowl plaque) is a disease that is highly infectious for domestic fowl, especially chickens and turkeys that suffer from serious disease courses. Bird flu is caused by various avian flu strains, including the subtypes H5N1, H5N6, H5N8 and H7N9, that can also cause serious illness among humans in some cases. The BfR provided more information about the subtype H5N1 in 2004 at

https://www.bfr.bund.de/cm/343/gefluegelpest_infektionsrisiko_fuer_den_verbraucher_durch_lebensmittel.pdf

and about subtype H5N8 in 2021 at

<http://vm-webextern-m.bfr.bund.de/cm/349/current-avian-influenza-case-in-germany-virus-transmission-h5n8-from-poultry-food-consumption-is-unlikely.pdf>

Further information is available on the websites of the Friedrich Loeffler Institute (www.fli.de), the Robert Koch Institute (www.rki.de), and the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (www.bmel.bund.de).

Where has the bird flu been detected so far?

There is more information about the latest spread of bird flu on the homepage of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) at

https://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/programmes/en/empres/Global_AIV_Zoonotic_Update/situation_update.html and the World Health Organization (WHO), at https://www.who.int/health-topics/influenza-avian-and-other-zoonotic#tab=tab_1

Can the bird flu virus be transmitted to humans?

It is difficult to transmit the bird flu virus to humans. The WHO received a total of 863 reports of human infection with avian influenza viruses of subtype H5N1 from 18 countries between January 2003 and December 2021 (WHO, Avian Influenza Weekly Update Number 823 dated 17.12.2021). This is a very low number in light of the huge spread and high infection density of the pathogen in the global poultry population and the associated frequent contacts between humans and poultry. Also, only few cases of human infection with the other subtypes have been reported (WHO, Avian Influenza Weekly Update Number 823 dated 17.12.2021).

How can the bird flu virus be transmitted to humans?

The bird flu virus is primarily transmitted by breathing in (inhaling) contaminated dust particles or droplets. The virus can possibly also be transmitted by smear infection with virus-contaminated excretions on mucous membranes. Persons who have close contact with poultry should take suitable precautions. Detailed recommendations about this are stated on the websites of the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (<http://www.baua.de>) and the Robert Koch Institute (<http://www.rki.de>).

Is there a risk of infection when preparing and consuming food?

Based on the current knowledge, direct contact with poultry is the most important transmission route of the virus between poultry and humans. There is only little known about virus transmission by the consumption of raw poultry meat products from infected animals. However, with respect to the preventive consumer protection, care should be taken to comply with hygiene rules when handling or preparing raw poultry meat and poultry meat products. As the virus is highly sensitive to high temperatures, food that has been well cooked is safe. Meat is considered well cooked, if all sides and the core reach a temperature of at least 70°C for 2 minutes. This is evident to consumers when the poultry meat is no longer red or pink and no red juices are leaking out. In the case of eggs or egg products, it is possible to protect against these viruses and other possibly present pathogens by avoiding the consumption of raw egg products (whipped egg whites, tiramisu etc.), and by ensuring that the egg white and yolks of boiled eggs are solid.

How can consumers protect themselves?

Humans should avoid contact with wild birds. This particularly applies for died animals and for regions in which the bird flu virus was detected in dead wild birds (restricted areas, observation areas). Visitors to countries in which the bird flu is widely distributed among poultry flocks should avoid direct contact with poultry and their excretions. It is advised to refrain from visiting poultry markets of poultry farms. Import bans on poultry or other birds, poultry meat, eggs and other poultry products, or feathers or untreated hunting trophies from affected countries into the European Union should always be observed to prevent further outbreaks of bird flu in domestic commercial livestock. When preparing poultry meat and raw eggs, the general hygiene regulations should be observed:

- Store and prepare raw poultry products and other food separately, especially if the latter is not reheated.
- Thoroughly clean equipment and surfaces that have come into contact with raw poultry products with warm water and detergent.
- Dispose of packaging materials, thawing water and similar immediately.

- Wash hands with warm water and soap.
- Cook poultry meals thoroughly. This means that all areas, even the core, must have reached a temperature of at least 70°C for 2 minutes.
- In the case of eggs or egg products, it is possible to protect against these viruses and other possibly present pathogens by avoiding the consumption of raw egg products (whipped egg whites, tiramisu etc.), and by ensuring that the egg white and yolks of boiled eggs are solid.

Can animals and humans become infected with bird flu from animal or human drinking water?

Surface water from waters with large populations of wild birds may, in principle, be contaminated with bird flu viruses. It should not be used as drinking water for breeding and commercial poultry, if it has not been appropriately treated.

Drinking water in Germany is primarily collected from deep wells. This guarantees a high level of safety regarding microbiological risks. Wherever drinking water is collected from surface waters, complex technical procedures are used that comply with the tolerances and requirements of the Drinking Water Regulations. This reliably rules out contamination of drinking water with bird flu viruses. The German Federal Office for Environment provides more information about drinking water (<https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/themen/wasser/trinkwasser>).

Can lettuce or vegetables transmit bird flu viruses?

In principle, lettuce, vegetable and fruit farmed outdoors can become contaminated with bird droppings. These may contain bird flu viruses. To minimise the risk of transmission of viruses, bacteria and parasites to humans, lettuce, fruit and vegetables are roughly cleaned in the production facility before storage. The usual hygiene rules should be observed when preparing lettuce, fruit and vegetables at home: Before preparation or consumption, wash thoroughly to remove all earth and manure particles. Cooked vegetables also offer more safety against infection: The bird flu virus is inactivated, if heated to above 70°C for at least 2 minutes.

Can milk contain the bird flu virus?

A study, in which cattle were infected experimentally with avian influenza virus, showed that animals can be infected, but that the virus is only excreted in very small amounts. This indicates that in a natural environment the risk of cattle transmitting this virus is low. There is no evidence that bird flu virus is present in milk. When milk is pasteurized, the viruses and also other pathogenic microorganisms would be inactivated.

How can consumers recognise the origin of eggs or poultry?

The code number of the packing point must be stated on egg cartons. This may also contain information about the origin of the eggs. The eggs themselves bear the country code of the country of origin.

Poultry meat sold in retail shops bears the approval number of the slaughterhouse or meat processing facility, and poultry meat that was imported from non-EU countries the country of origin, on the packaging or label.

There are relevant legal regulations that govern the import and the trade of live poultry from livestock populations and their products. There are more recommendations about hygienic handling of poultry meat on the websites of the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (www.bfr.bund.de)

Can humans become infected with the bird flu virus after eating shellfish and fish?

It is known that viruses can be transmitted to humans after eating uncooked or inadequately cooked shellfish and thereafter cause gastroenteritis. These are usually norovirus and hepatitis A virus that are very resistant to environmental influences. In contrast, influenza viruses are very sensitive to environmental influences. Examinations of samples from surface waters confirm the tendency that the infectivity of avian influenza viruses decreases proportionally to the salt content. Human infection with bird flu viruses after eating shellfish or fish is therefore unlikely and has not yet been proven. Cooking shellfish and fish offers additional protection against infection: The bird flu virus is usually inactivated, if heated to above 70°C for at least 2 minutes.

Can poultry manure be still used as fertilizer?

Poultry manure from healthy poultry livestock not infected with the bird flu virus from operations that lie outside the bird flu restricted areas can still be used. Poultry manure made of infected or potentially infected stocks must be 'decontaminated', i.e. disinfected. There are a series of effective procedures that are specified by the Tiergesundheitsgesetz and related regulations.

Can humans become infected with bird flu from objects like down jackets, pillows or quilts produced with feathers or down from infected animals?

Down is washed during production and then dried at 100°C. Influenza viruses are very sensitive to heat and to the detergents used in soaps and washing agents. Based on the current knowledge, the methods used to produce down also inactivate bird flu viruses so that they are no longer infectious. An infection with the bird flu virus through objects that contain feathers or down is therefore very unlikely.