

**Animal Health Advisory: Neurologic Cats and Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza  
H5N1 Testing in Los Angeles County  
5.29.2024**

**Key Points:**

- Cats may become infected with Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 by consuming raw milk from infected cows, raw meat from infected poultry, or from hunting infected wild birds.
- Affected cats usually develop severe neurologic signs and die from the infection.
- Veterinarians in Los Angeles (LA) County are asked to report cats with severe, unexplained neurologic signs, and submit samples for both rabies and HPAI H5N1 testing.

Dear Veterinary Colleagues:

HPAI H5N1 has been detected in cats at dairy farms in other states where dairy cattle were also infected. Cats became severely ill with neurologic signs after ingesting raw milk from the infected cattle. Although HPAI H5N1 has not been detected in any cattle in California, the virus has been found in birds throughout the state, including in wild birds in LA County. Since Sept 2022, a total of 34 infected wild birds have been detected in LA County, with the most recent one being a gull found in Manhattan Beach in January 2024. To date, no cats or other mammals in LA County have tested positive for the virus.

While primarily affecting poultry, HPAI H5N1 infections in cats and other mammals highlight the potential for the virus to mutate and become more transmissible among mammals, including humans.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health requests your assistance in monitoring for potential HPAI H5N1 cases in cats.

**Risk Factors for HPAI H5N1 in cats:**

- Consumption of raw milk from HPAI H5N1 infected cows
- Ingestion of raw meat from infected birds
- Direct contact with infected wild birds or poultry

## Your Role:

Advise your clients to avoid feeding raw milk to cats and other pets while this virus is circulating in dairy cattle.

**Submit specimens for rabies testing from any cats with unexplained, progressive, and severe neurologic signs.** They will now also be tested for HPAI H5N1 at no cost. Please include in your history:

- Clinical signs/reason for rabies testing
- Any cattle, raw milk, or poultry exposure
- Any direct exposure to wild birds

## Rabies and HPAI H5N1 Testing in Cats - Submission instructions:

- Follow rabies testing instructions (pg. 15) in our manual:  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/docs/2022VPHManual.pdf>
- Wear appropriate PPE (well-fitting N95 respirator, eye protection, hair covering, gloves, and gown.)
- Specimen should be prepared by staff vaccinated for rabies.
- Double-bag and refrigerate specimens.
- Complete Animal Bite Report Form (even if no bite):  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/forms.htm> - Note "None" in the Person Bitten section if there was no bite.
- Email form to [vet@ph.lacounty.gov](mailto:vet@ph.lacounty.gov) with a summary of the cat's clinical signs and possible exposures.
- Our staff will pick up the specimen from your practice.

## Resources:

- Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 in Los Angeles County.  
<http://ph.lacounty.gov/vet/HPAI.htm>
- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – Avian Influenza – Situation Summary - <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/avian-flu-summary.htm>
- California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) - Avian Influenza  
[https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/ahfss/Animal\\_Health/Avian\\_Influenza.html](https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/ahfss/Animal_Health/Avian_Influenza.html)
- USDA - Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Detections in Livestock .  
<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections/livestock>
- USDA – Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Detections in Mammals  
<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections/mammals>

For Questions, please contact Veterinary Public Health: 213-288-7060 (M-F, 8am-5pm) or [vet@ph.lacounty.gov](mailto:vet@ph.lacounty.gov).

Sincerely,

Karen Ehnert, DVM, MPVM, DACVPM  
Director  
Veterinary Public Health  
Los Angeles County Department of Public Health  
313 N. Figueroa St, Room 1127  
Los Angeles, CA 90012  
(213) 288-7060  
(213) 481-2375 Fax  
[kehner@ph.lacounty.gov](mailto:kehner@ph.lacounty.gov)  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/>

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