

Poultry keepers urged to take action now to prepare for winter avian flu threat

Simple measures can help to keep flocks disease free. All keepers – whether they run a large commercial farm or keep just a few pet chickens in their back garden – can get ahead of the game and take these simple steps to reduce the risk of disease before autumn migration of ducks and geese begins again this winter:

- keep the area where birds live clean and tidy, control rats and mice and regularly disinfect any hard surfaces. Clean footwear before and after visits
- place birds' food and water in fully enclosed areas that are protected from wild birds, and remove any spilled feed regularly
- put fencing around outdoor areas where birds are allowed, and limit their access to ponds or areas visited by wild waterfowl
- in Great Britain, stay alert by signing up online to a free service to receive text or email alerts on any outbreaks of bird flu in the UK. You can also quickly and easily register your flock online. In Northern Ireland, visit the DAERA website for further information.

Last winter, the H5N8 strain of bird flu was found in 13 kept flocks in the UK – ranging in size from as few as nine to as many as 65,000 birds. We've seen a decline in the number of new cases over the summer, but the disease is still circulating in kept poultry across Europe, with Italy the most recent country to suffer a series of outbreaks. It has also recently been confirmed in a dead mute swan in Norfolk.

Government is working with groups including NFUs, RSPCA, British Hen Welfare Trust, Poultry Club of Great Britain and UFU to highlight the importance of keeping up high biosecurity even though the immediate disease risk has dropped.

Together, the groups are also keen to highlight the impact of bird flu on the poultry industry, as a case in a backyard flock leads to the same trade restrictions in an area as an outbreak on a commercial farm – so protecting chickens in a back garden from the disease also protects farmers locally and nationally.

The UK's Chief Veterinary Officer, Nigel Gibbens, said:

“While it is undoubtedly good news we haven't confirmed a case in kept birds in the UK for two months, the disease remains a threat – particularly as we move again towards the colder months.

“For that reason we cannot afford to rest on our laurels and I want to remind keepers of flocks large and small to do everything they can to reduce the risk to their birds.

“Simple actions you can take now, such as regularly cleaning and disinfecting the area where you keep your birds and signing up for free disease alerts, could really help to reduce the risk of your birds becoming infected this winter.”

The Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales, Christianne Glossop said:

“While I am sure this lack of new outbreaks will be welcomed by poultry and other captive bird keepers of both large and small flocks I would remind everyone it is vital they continue to be vigilant for signs of disease and maintain excellent biosecurity practices.

“If you are concerned about the health of your birds you should seek advice from your veterinary surgeon and if you suspect that your birds have AI, you should report it to your local Animal and Plant Health Agency office.”

The Chief Veterinary Officer for Scotland, Sheila Voas, said:

“Given the constant risk of bird flu in the UK from wild birds, I would urge bird keepers to take some simple actions now to help reduce the chance of their birds becoming infected. These could include steps to reduce contact with wild birds, particularly on ponds and other water bodies.

“One of the main challenges government faced during last year’s avian influenza outbreak was being able to contact bird keepers with small numbers of birds. To stay up to date with the latest situation I would encourage bird keepers – including those who are already on the GB Poultry Register – to sign up for the Animal and Plant Health Agency free text alerts service.”

Northern Ireland’s Chief Veterinary Officer, Robert Huey, said:

“While I welcome the lack of new outbreaks across the UK, the risk of avian influenza remains a real and constant threat. That is why it is essential that bird keepers maintain effective biosecurity all year round, not only when a prevention zone is in place.

“Poultry and other bird keepers in Northern Ireland are also reminded that their birds must be registered with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. This will ensure they can be contacted quickly in an avian disease outbreak, enabling

them to protect their flock at the earliest opportunity.”

Given the recent outbreaks in wild birds in Norfolk and on the continent, there is every likelihood disease will return this winter. Last year’s outbreak is believed to have been transmitted via migratory wild birds, which means keepers need to be aware of the danger of contact between wild and kept birds and take action now.

All keepers in GB can stay up to date with the latest situation by signing up for the Animal and Plant Health Agency [alerts service](#). Signing up is quick and free.