



# Guidelines for ringers: Diseases from birds, with particular reference to Avian Influenza



Highly pathogenic avian influenza HPAI occurs periodically in western Europe. Each time this happens it brings into sharp focus the potential for ringers to catch diseases from birds. Ringers are therefore reminded of the importance of practising good hygiene when handling birds as part of their normal ringing activities, as birds may carry a variety of diseases infective to people. This note provides some background on avian influenza, reiterates and extends sensible hygiene precautions for ringers and provides the addresses of useful websites. Please note that good personal hygiene is essential for your protection. We will continue to monitor the situation and will revise the guidelines as appropriate. Five types of the HPAI virus (H5N1, H7N3, H7N7, H7N9 and H9N2) are highly pathogenic in humans, should any of these be found in wild birds in Britain & Ireland, we will urgently reconsider these guidelines.

## Avian influenza

There are many strains (at least 144) of avian influenza, most of which have low pathogenicity (LPAI) and circulate in wild birds at low levels, though they tend to be more common in waterbirds. The highly pathogenic forms emerged in southeast Asia, spread westward and are now periodically detected in western Europe. HPAI viruses generally are of great concern as they cause high mortality in domestic poultry flocks. They are rare in wild birds. AI may be passed on via faeces (particularly dried faeces) and in other secretions.

It should be noted that there are no known cases of transmission from wild birds to humans, so even if a highly pathogenic form of HPAI does appear in Britain & Ireland the risk of transfer to ringers remains extremely remote. Human infections elsewhere in the world have occurred in people who have been closely associated with poultry.

Defra has [guidance on spotting and reporting avian influenza](#). Birdwatchers should report any unusual bird mortality to their [nearest Animal and Plant Health Agency \(APHA\) office](#).

## Hygiene precautions for ringers

Ringers should continue to practice good personal hygiene and, in particular, make efforts to **avoid bird faeces**, which may carry a variety of diseases (not just AI – see *Ringers' Manual*). Advice to ringers was updated in 2006 following discussions with the Health Protection Agency (HPA), who agreed the advice is appropriate. We will continue to consult public health professionals to ensure that advice to ringers remains current. The public health websites for the various countries have further information on zoonoses:

[Public Health England](#)  
[Public Health Agency \(Northern Ireland\)](#)  
[Health Protection Scotland](#)  
[Public Health Wales](#)  
[National Zoonoses Committee of Ireland](#)

**The following guidelines supersede those in *Ringers' Manual* and should be adopted immediately.**

- i During ringing, keep cuts and abrasions completely covered by a waterproof dressing<sup>1</sup>. If a cut or abrasion occurs during ringing, clean the wound immediately with soap and water and cover it with a waterproof dressing. If no soap and water is available, use an antiseptic wipe before covering the wound with a waterproof dressing. Wash the wound with soap and water as soon as possible.
- ii Avoid hand to mouth contact e.g. biting nails, sucking pens etc., during ringing activities.
- iii Before eating or smoking (or touching your face for any reason, removing or inserting contact lenses etc.) and at the end of each ringing session, wash your hands with soap and water and dry them thoroughly on a clean towel.
- iv If working away from somewhere with running water take a container of water, a bowl, soap and clean towel into the field. If this is not practicable, carry hand wipes (those supplied for cleaning babies work well). Hand wipes can be used to clean faeces from hands, clothes, equipment etc. However, note that most hand wipes are only active against bacteria not viruses and others are not active against either. The key is to have a type which is large and very moist to wipe off contamination. Immediately on return from working away from running water, wash your hands with soap and clean running water and dry them thoroughly on a clean towel. Again, avoid any hand to face or mouth activities until you are able to thoroughly wash your hands.
- v If faeces get onto clothes, wipe them off immediately using a hand wipe, tissue or similar. When doing so, ensure that there is no contamination of hands so that the faeces cannot be transferred to your face or mouth.
- vi Wash contaminated clothes using detergent. Choose a washing temperature that complies with the instructions provided by the manufacturer of the detergent. Do not include other clothing in the same wash. If an item of clothing cannot be washed (e.g. waxed jacket), wash it down with water and detergent.
- vii Avoid using your ringing clothes for other activities.
- viii Carry bags to put waste in if hand wipes or tissues are used, or to put soiled clothes in for transportation. Dispose of the sealed bag of waste in domestic or commercial waste. If you need to put such a bag in a vehicle, ensure that it is securely fastened and secure in the vehicle to prevent soiling of the vehicle.
- ix Follow hygiene precautions listed above when handling used bird bags or other equipment.
- x When examining birds in bird bags or containers, do so in a well-lit and well-ventilated area and, to avoid the possibility of inhaling dried faecal or other material, do not breathe in.
- xi Keep bird bags, and other bird containers and equipment, clean. Wash **all** bird bags after **every** ringing session, separately from other washing and using detergent. Wash other equipment that is visibly contaminated with hot water and detergent. Do not wash equipment in food hygiene areas – avoid the kitchen sink - a bucket of hot water and detergent outside would be appropriate.
- xii Store all ringing equipment out of the domestic living space and in a secure place.
- xiii During a ringing session, minimise the reuse of soiled bird bags etc. to avoid risk of transfer of disease between birds.

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<sup>1</sup> Use waterproof occlusive dressings. Examples of good dressing materials are those used by the catering trade (usually blue) as they make a waterproof seal.

- xiv If you catch a bird which sneezes and/or has obvious discharges in or around the nares or the beak, this may be evidence of respiratory infection. In this case release the bird immediately, wash your hands and, before it is reused, wash any equipment that has come into contact with the bird. Make a note of the species involved, the time, date and place and report it to the Ringing Unit ([ringing@bto.org](mailto:ringing@bto.org)).

If you suspect an infection related to ringing, tell your doctor and explain what ringing involves.

Ringers record moult, brood patch, cloacal protuberance and fat scores by blowing the feathers of birds. It has been suggested that this could expose ringers to viral pathogens from faeces as they are exhaling (and potentially inhaling) in areas where faecal material may be present (Rogers 2003). To reduce any risk, ringers should do this as efficiently as possible to minimise the time and amount of blowing required. Avoid breathing in when blowing – turn to one side to breathe. Do not use a tube to assist blowing as it would be easy to turn it around and place the end which had been next to the bird in the ringer's mouth.

Cloacal sexing (everting the cloaca to look for a penis) should only be carried out when considered necessary for the study. Only very experienced ringers who have been trained to use this technique and are wearing disposable gloves should do it. Wearing gloves does not remove the necessity for washing hands in soap and water and drying with a clean towel before eating, touching the face etc. and at the end of a catching session.

Ringers should also avoid the possibility of transferring AI to poultry or domestic birds. Vehicles, equipment, footwear and clothing used for ringing and catching birds should not be taken onto poultry farms or used/stored in the vicinity of domestic ducks, poultry or other domestic birds (e.g. avicultural collections, pheasants etc.).

Useful web addresses

[Avian Flu](#) (BTO website)

[Avian Influenza: guidance, data and analysis](#) (Public Health England)

[Avian Influenza](#) (Scottish Government)

[Avian Influenza](#) (Welsh Government)

[Avian Influenza](#) (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland)

[Avian Influenza](#) (Food Safety Authority of Ireland)

Rogers, C.M. (2003) New and continuing issues with using visible fat classes to estimate fat stores of birds. *Journal of Avian Biology* **34**, 129–133.

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