

## The Bird Flu – is it a threat to my cat?

It has been documented that the H5N1 influenza virus, the so-called “Bird Flu” has infected and killed domestic and non-domestic cats. In Thailand, the virus killed a number of exotic cats, including clouded leopard and tigers. In Asia, and in Germany and Austria, the virus has infected and killed domestic cats. These animals contracted the virus from contact with or eating (uncooked) infected birds. In these cases, the animals showed “flu-like” signs, including fever, lethargy, and labored breathing. *However, these were rare events.*

Dogs have also been shown to be susceptible to infection with the H5N1 virus, but do not become ill nor do they transmit the virus. This virus has been shown to cause severe disease in ferrets experimentally, but their risk of natural exposure is extremely low unless housed with infected birds.

Owners may be worried about their cats, AND themselves – could my cat give me the avian flu? Studies have shown that infected cats do shed the virus, including in feces, though at much lower levels than birds. However, there is thusfar **no evidence** that cats can in turn infect humans. So, while cats could become ill from infection with the bird flu, they are not believed to be an important source of the virus for humans.

The H5N1 avian influenza has not been identified in North America; however, it may be worthwhile to implement safeguards for our feline friends. If the H5N1 bird flu reaches the USA, it will be important to follow these recommendations:

- Eliminate or minimize contact between cats and birds or their droppings, especially waterfowl such as ducks and geese.
- Eliminate or minimize contact with feral cats living outside the home.
- Keeping cats indoors is ideal.
- Never feed uncooked meat to your pet.
- Have any ill animal examined by a veterinarian.

Animal shelters and feline rescue groups may want to institute additional measures, such as avoiding housing of poultry, not housing ferrets with cats, and eliminating contact of wildlife (in the case of rehabilitation centers) with domestic animals.

There are many good websites with valuable information. Some of these include:

- [www.avma.org/public\\_healthy/influenza/avian](http://www.avma.org/public_healthy/influenza/avian)
- [www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/news/influenza.htm](http://www.vet.cornell.edu/fhc/news/influenza.htm)
- [www.healthypet.com](http://www.healthypet.com)
- [www.sheltermedicine.com](http://www.sheltermedicine.com)
- [www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/flu/avian/index.htm)
- [www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)
- [www.pandemicflu.gov](http://www.pandemicflu.gov)
- [www.who.int/csr/disease/avian\\_influenza/](http://www.who.int/csr/disease/avian_influenza/)