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URGENT HEALTH BULLETIN

Avian Influenza H5N1 Updates

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(<https://www.kernpublichealth.com/i-want-to/review/health-bulletins>)

January 27, 2025

Dear Kern County Healthcare Provider:

This urgent health bulletin is being sent to call your attention to the ongoing risk of avian influenza H5N1 in Kern County and new commercial testing options.

Summary

Since 2024, four Kern County residents have been confirmed with H5N1 infections. Healthcare providers are reminded to consider Avian Influenza (H5N1) in persons with consistent symptoms and potential exposures. CDC recommends subtyping of all influenza A specimens in hospitalized patients, particularly in the ICU. Multiple commercial clinical laboratories now offer influenza A(H5) subtyping.

Background

Since 2022, Avian Influenza H5N1 has been detected in wild birds, poultry flocks, and dairy cattle across the United States. Beginning in August 2024, multiple dairies across California have identified infected cattle. While sporadic cases in other mammalian wildlife have been detected in California, multiple domestic cats (i.e. pets) have also been identified with H5N1. H5N1 has also been detected in raw, unpasteurized milk and raw meat pet products.

Since 2024, there have been 67 confirmed human cases reported in the United States, including one death. As of January 15, 2024, in California, 38 cases have been identified, with 36 of those cases reporting close contact with dairy cattle. While there has been no human-to-human transmission detected and the risk to the general public remains low, certain persons continue to be at higher risk of exposure to H5N1.

Recommendations for Healthcare Providers and Healthcare Facilities

Healthcare providers are recommended to do the following:

- **Consider H5N1** in any patient with potential exposure to infected animals and compatible symptoms.
- **Isolate** the patient and implement infection control measures.
- **Immediately report** any suspected or confirmed case of H5N1 to Kern County Public Health by phone at (661) 321-3000 during regular business hours or (661) 241-3255 on nights, weekends, and holidays.
- **Collect specimens** for laboratory testing wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Do not send patients directly to Kern County Public Health for testing.
- **Consider** testing for other respiratory illnesses based on local epidemiology.
- **Treat** patients suspected of H5N1 with empiric antiviral treatment as soon as possible.

Grounded in Health

PHSU 2501

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Additional Recommendations for Hospitalized Patients

CDC recommends that all influenza A positive respiratory specimens from hospitalized patients be subtyped for seasonal influenza A viruses [A(H1) and A(H3)]. For hospitalized patients with suspected or confirmed influenza:

- **Obtain thorough exposure history**, including exposures to wild and domestic animals, animal products (raw cow milk or raw meat-based pet food), or recent close contact with a symptomatic person with suspected or confirmed H5N1.
- **Implement infection control**, including placement in airborne infection isolation room and standard, contact, and airborne precautions, including eye protection.
- **Test** for influenza and perform subtyping for any specimens that test positive for influenza A.
 - Subtyping should be performed in the hospital clinical laboratory, if available. Alternately, specimens should be submitted to a commercial clinical laboratory.
- **Submit specimens** to commercial clinical laboratories for influenza A(H5) testing if influenza A subtyping does not result in seasonal influenza A virus such as A(H1) or A(H3). If a seasonal influenza A virus subtype is identified, no further testing is recommended unless the patient reports a high-risk H5N1 exposure. For more details see [High-Risk Exposures](#)
 - Influenza A(H5) testing is available at multiple commercial clinical laboratories. For more details see [Laboratory Testing](#)
- **Immediately report** any influenza A subtyping results that are not seasonal influenza, including A(H5) to Kern County Public Health by phone at (661) 321-3000 during regular business hours or (661) 241-3255 on nights, weekends, and holidays.

Services like diagnostic and subtype testing that are reasonable and necessary to diagnose illness are covered in most cases by both public and private health insurance plans.

Laboratory Testing

Currently, commercial laboratories offering influenza A(H5) testing include the following:

- [Quest Diagnostics](#)
- [LabCorp](#)
- [ARUP](#)

All three commercial laboratories support both respiratory and conjunctival specimens. Please refer to the individual laboratory's website for specimen handling requirements. Influenza A(H5) testing may become available at additional commercial laboratories.

Only patients with high-risk exposures who are suspected of having an H5N1 infection should have specimens sent to the Kern County Public Health Laboratory for expedited testing. Please contact Kern County Public Health by phone at (661) 321-3000 to request public health testing. Once approved, specimens should be collected according to the following guidelines:

- Wear appropriate PPE during specimen collection.
- Use Dacron swabs or another swab made of synthetic material with an aluminum or plastic shaft.
- For patients presenting with respiratory symptoms, collect the following specimens:
 - Nasopharyngeal (NP) swab in viral transport medium (VTM) or universal transport medium (UTM) and
 - Combined nasal and oropharyngeal swab with both swabs in either VTM or UTM.

- For patients presenting with conjunctivitis, collect the following specimens:
 - NP swab in VTM or UTM and
 - Conjunctival swab in VTM or UTM. See [CDC's Conjunctival Swab Specimen Collection for Detection of Avian Influenza A\(H5\) Viruses](#) document for more information regarding conjunctival swab specimen collection.

A negative Influenza A molecular test rules out H5N1 for the specimen site tested. However, patients have tested negative at one site and positive at others. Do not use a single negative respiratory specimen to rule out H5N1 infection, especially among patients presenting with conjunctivitis or other symptoms. If negative Influenza A results were received from all recommended specimen collection sites, no further testing is required. This interpretation applies only to molecular tests; antigen tests **cannot** rule out H5N1 infection.

High-Risk Exposures

Persons with compatible symptoms and any of the following high-risk exposures should immediately be assessed for H5N1 and reported to Kern County Public Health:

- **Exposure to infected animals**, including:
 - Close contact (within six feet) with infected animals, including, but not limited to: caring for, handling, milking, slaughtering, defeathering, butchering, culling; OR
 - Preparing or consuming raw animal products from infected animals, or consuming uncooked or undercooked food or food products (including unpasteurized milk) from infected animals; OR
 - Direct contact with surfaces contaminated with feces, unpasteurized milk or other unpasteurized dairy products, or animal parts (e.g. carcasses, internal organs) from infected animals; OR
- **Exposure to an infected person**: close (within six feet), unprotected (without use of respiratory and eye protection) contact with a person who is a symptomatic, suspected or confirmed H5N1 influenza case (e.g. in a household or healthcare facility); OR
- **Laboratory exposure**: unprotected exposure to H5N1 influenza virus in a laboratory setting.

Signs and Symptoms of H5N1

- Conjunctivitis with or without other symptoms
- Uncomplicated upper respiratory signs (e.g. cough, sore throat) with or without fever
- Fever (infections do not always cause fever, especially among those 65 or older and people with immunosuppression)
- Muscle or body aches, headaches, and/or fatigue
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Less common symptoms may include diarrhea, nausea, or vomiting.

Infection Control Considerations

Standard, contact, and airborne precautions are required for patients presenting for medical care or evaluation who have illness consistent with influenza and recent exposure to potentially infected animals.

- For additional guidance, refer to [CDC's Infection Control Guidance within Healthcare Settings when Caring for Patients with Novel Influenza A viruses](#).
- For California-specific information on infection control requirements in healthcare settings, refer to [Cal/OSHA's Protection from Avian Influenza](#) webpage; and [California's Aerosol Transmissible Diseases standard](#).

Vaccination, Treatment, and Chemoprophylaxis

Seasonal influenza vaccines are not effective against H5N1; however, seasonal influenza vaccination continues to be recommended for the general public during winter respiratory virus season.

Antiviral treatment is recommended as soon as possible for all patients with suspected or confirmed H5N1 virus infections. Antiviral treatment should not be delayed while waiting for laboratory test results.

- Standard treatment for adolescents and adults is oral oseltamivir 75 mg twice daily for 5 days.
 - Children 12 years and younger may be recommended for smaller dosage based on weight.
 - Dosage adjustment is needed in adult patients with renal impairment.
 - Oseltamivir is not recommended for people with end-stage renal disease (ESRD) who are not receiving dialysis.
- Refer to [CDC's Interim Guidance on the Use of Antiviral Medications for Treatment of Human Infections with Novel Influenza A Viruses Associated with Severe Human Disease](#) for additional information.

Close contacts to a suspected or confirmed HPAI A(H5N1) case are recommended to receive post-exposure prophylaxis in accordance with CDC's [Emergency Use Instructions](#).

- Adolescent and adult contacts should receive oral oseltamivir 75 mg twice daily for 5 days after last exposure.
 - For persons with ongoing exposures, 10 days of chemoprophylaxis is recommended.
- Children 12 years and younger may be recommended to receive a smaller dosage based on weight.

Reporting Suspected or Confirmed Cases

In accordance with Title 17, Section 2500, all suspected or confirmed cases of influenza due to novel strains (including H5N1) must be reported to Kern County Public Health. For questions, to report suspected cases of H5N1, and to request testing, please call (661) 321-3000 during regular business. After hours, on weekends, and holidays, call (661) 241-3255 to be connected to the On-Call Public Health staff.

Additional Resources

- KCPH: [Health Bulletin: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza \(HPAI\) H5N1 in Kern County](#)
- CDPH: [Novel Influenza](#)
- CDPH: [Avian and Novel Influenza Quicksheet](#)
- CDPH: [CDPH Worker Protection from the Bird Flu](#)
- CDPH: [Viral and Rickettsial Disease Laboratory - Novel/Avian Influenza Virus \(human\) PCR testing](#)
- CDPH: [News Release: CDPH Warns Against Drinking Single Lot of Raw Milk Following Bird Flu Detection; Secures Voluntary Recall](#)
- CDC: [CDC - Clinician Brief: Evaluating and Managing Patients Exposed to Animals or Persons Infected with Novel Influenza A Viruses of Public Health Concern](#)
- CDC: [Interim Recommendations for Prevention, Monitoring, and Public Health Investigations](#)
- CDC: [Interim Guidance on the Use of Antiviral Medications for Treatment of Human Infections with Novel Influenza A Viruses Associated with Severe Human Disease](#)
- CDC: [Interim Guidance for Follow-up of Close Contacts of Persons Infected with Novel Influenza A Viruses Associated with Severe Human Disease or with Potential to Cause Severe Human Disease, and Use of Antiviral Medications for Post-exposure Prophylaxis](#)
- CDC: [Interim Guidance for Infection Control Within Healthcare Settings When Caring for Confirmed Cases, Probable Cases, and Cases Under Investigation for Infection with Novel Influenza A Viruses Associated with Severe Disease](#)
- CDC: [Health Alert Network \(HAN\) - 00520 | Accelerated Subtyping of Influenza A in Hospitalized Patients](#)

- CDC: [Considerations for Veterinarians: Evaluating and Handling of Cats Potentially Exposed to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A\(H5N1\) Virus | Bird Flu | CDC](#)
- CDC: [Resources for Veterinarians and Veterinary Staff Handling Animals with HPAI A\(H5N1\) Virus Infection on Dairy Farms | Bird Flu | CDC](#)

If you have any questions, please contact KCPHSD by phone at 661-321-3000, via email at publichealth@kerncounty.com, or visit the [KCPHSD website](#).

Thank you,

Kristopher Lyon, M.D.
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Health Officer