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CONFIRMED H5N1 BIRD FLU IN SANTA BARBARA COUNTY CATS; NO HUMAN CASES

(SANTA BARBARA, Calif.) – The Santa Barbara County Public Health Department (SBCPHD) has confirmed two cases of H5 bird flu in domesticated cats from two different households. After testing positive for influenza A, a rare occurrence in felines, the infected cats developed severe neurological illness and sadly succumbed to the virus. The sources of infection are still under investigation by SBCPHD.

Currently, there is no evidence of local cat-to-cat, cat-to-human or human-to-human spread of H5 bird flu, and the risk to the general public continues to be low. However, people who come into close contact with wild birds and their feces, infected cats, infected poultry, or with infected dairy cattle or their milk, have a higher level of risk of exposure. It is important to take proper precautions as listed below.

Cats may be exposed to H5 bird flu by consuming infected birds or other animals, being in environments contaminated with the virus, and consuming unpasteurized milk from infected cows. Cats infected with H5 bird flu may develop severe illness that can include fever and neurologic symptoms, and that can rapidly progress to death. While transmission of the H5 bird flu virus from mammal to mammal can occur, there have been no known cases to date of H5 bird flu transmitted from cats to humans from this nationwide H5 bird flu outbreak.

Best Practices to Reduce Risk for You and Your Pets

While the current risk of transmission of H5 bird flu to Santa Barbara County residents and pets remains low, the Public Health Department encourages these best practices:

- **Avoid raw dairy and undercooked meat products:** Do not drink raw milk or eat raw cheeses and undercooked meat products. Do not feed these to your pets.
- **Raw milk**, even from healthy cows, may be contaminated with harmful germs that can make you and your pets very sick. Freezing raw milk does not eliminate the harmful germs that may be in the product.
- **Limit contact with sick animals:** Avoid unprotected contact with sick or dead animals, including birds, or any materials contaminated with bird feces. Avoid handling wild birds and observe them only from a distance. If you have to handle wild birds, even if they appear healthy, wear a well-fitting mask and gloves, and practice good hand hygiene, as some birds may carry the virus without showing symptoms.

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- **Report sick or dead birds:** If you come across any sick or dead birds, please contact the appropriate agencies listed below for proper handling and assistance. Symptoms can vary; infected birds or animals may be unable to fly, have seizures, have difficulty walking or be found dead.
- **Protect pets or poultry:** Keep pets or poultry away from wild animals and birds. Ensure that wild birds cannot defecate into areas holding or housing pet birds or poultry.
- **Get a seasonal flu vaccine:** People are encouraged to receive a seasonal flu vaccine.
- **California Department of Public Health recommends veterinary practitioners:** Review [CDC guidelines](#) for safe practices while handling cats possibly infected with H5N1, including wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as N95 respirator, goggles or face shield, gloves, and gowns.

For any questions regarding symptoms or potential exposure, please call the Santa Barbara Public Health Department Disease Control 24/7 phone line at 805-681-5280 and dc@sbpcphd.org

Additional Resources

To report a sick or dead animal that may have H5N1, you can contact the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) or the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA):

- **CDFA:** Call the CDFA Sick Bird Hotline at (866) 922-BIRD (2473) to report sick poultry.
- **USDA:** Call the USDA toll-free hotline at (866) 536-7593 to report sick birds.
- **California Department of Fish and Wildlife:** Report unusual or suspicious dead wild birds online at https://www.cdfa.ca.gov/AHFSS/Animal_Health/Avian_Health_Program.html

CDC H5 Bird Flu: Current Situation:

<https://www.cdc.gov/bird-flu/situation-summary/index.html>

CDPH Bird Flu:

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Bird-Flu.aspx>