



Public Health Brief

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Bird Flu in Cats and Other Wild Animals



H5N1 infections are rare in American pets, but they've become increasingly common over the past two years as the virus has begun to circulate in a growing variety of animals, including dairy cows and farmed poultry like turkey and chicken. Infected cats include barn and feral cats, indoor cats, and big cats at the zoo and in the wild (e.g., mountain lions, tigers, leopards, and bobcats). Cats are particularly vulnerable to the virus, which causes a **fatality rate of more than 50%**.



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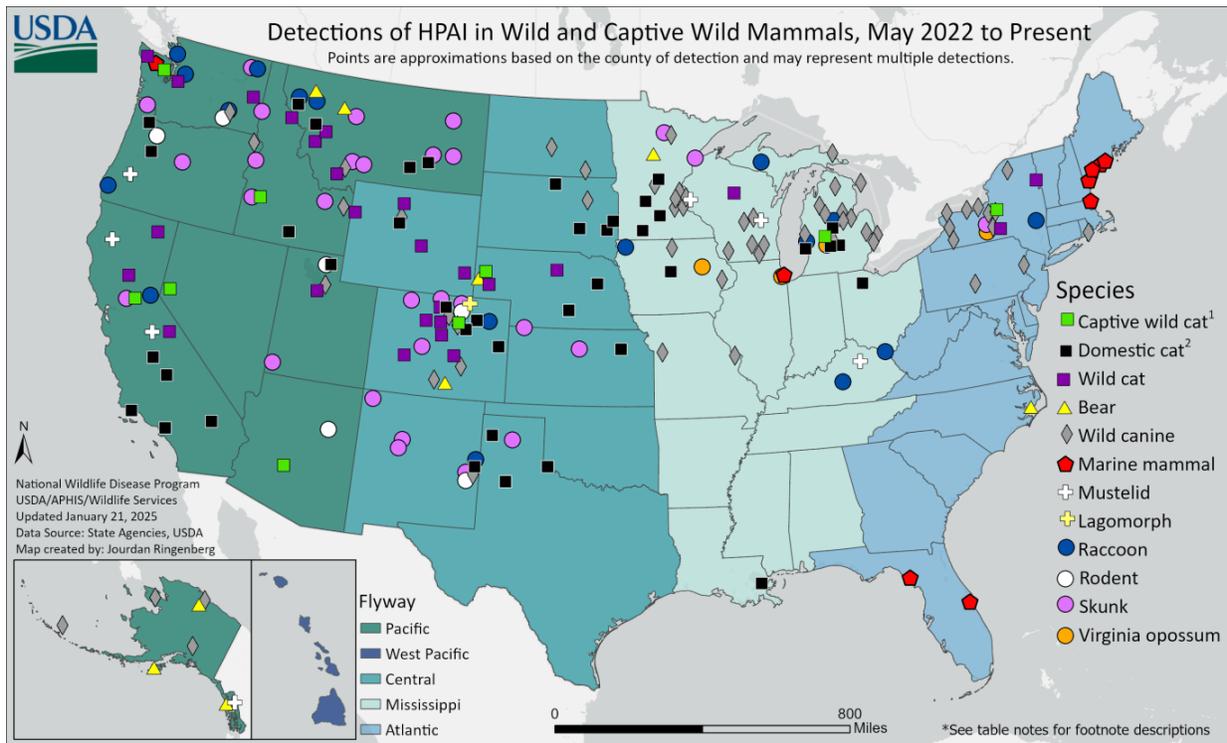
As with chickens, the virus can invade their brains and cause devastating neurologic complications. Cats were already known to be susceptible to the H5N1 virus, with several feline cases linked to poultry or wild bird exposure before the cattle outbreak began.

Since December 2022, at least 74 pet cats have tested positive for bird flu in [California](#), Colorado, Minnesota, [Oregon](#), and South Dakota. Domestic cats are the third most common detection of H5N1 in non-farm mammals in the US, behind red foxes and mice.

That official tally of infected cats is almost certainly an undercount. Cats usually get less vet care than dogs, so they are in clinics a lot less often. When cats get the flu, they can deteriorate very quickly and may not show signs of illness until it's too late.

To be added to the official count, animals not only have to be seen in a vet's office, and they must be tested, and those test results have to be reported to the state, which has to confirm them. Pet owners must pay for most of these steps, which can be a further disincentive.

You might have a cat that's looking a little bit off in the morning. You say "Yeah, my cat's not looking that great. Let's see what happens". They might be dead overnight. Most people aren't going to take their animal in for testing afterward.



<https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/avian/avian-influenza/hpai-detections/mammals>



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What are the symptoms of bird flu in cats?

Cats sick with bird flu might experience loss of appetite, lethargy and fever. If your cat is usually playful and likes to look out the window but instead has been sleeping all the time or hiding from you, take note. There's something wrong. They could have reddened or inflamed eyes and discharge from the eyes and nose. They might have difficulty breathing or have tremors or seizures. If your cat is sick, call your veterinary clinic and keep the cat away from anyone with a weakened immune system.

Raw Pet Food and Raw Milk

[Multiple cases of H5N1 in domestic cats](#) have been linked to the consumption of [contaminated raw pet food and raw milk](#). Health officials and veterinarians [strongly advise](#) pet owners against feeding pets commercially available raw foods, raw meat, raw poultry, or raw milk due to the risks associated with the virus.

Last Friday, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced it is tracking multiple cases of H5N1 in domestic and wild cats, including cases linked to contaminated pet food. The [FDA advised](#) that while dogs can also be infected, their symptoms are usually milder. Cats, however, are at greater risk.

The agency [directed pet food manufacturers](#) to consider the risk of bird flu in their required food safety plans, including adding a step to cook animal products like milk, meat or eggs, or adding supply chain controls to ensure that the products they're using in their food don't come from infected flocks or herds. "We encourage consumers to carefully consider the risk of this emerging pathogen before feeding their pets uncooked meat or an uncooked pet food product," the agency said.

The FDA says there's no formal or regulatory definition of "raw" pet food. Although most companies that sell uncooked foods label them "raw" as a selling point, it is not required. Some freeze-dried pet treats are made with raw meat, for example, but aren't necessarily labeled that way.

Companies often use the term "raw" to indicate that a product has not undergone heat treatment. The foods may undergo other types of treatments designed to reduce pathogens, including high-pressure processing, acidification or irradiation, "however, their effectiveness on viral pathogens such as H5N1 is unknown at this time," the FDA said in a statement.

There are processes in place to prevent products from sick animals from entering the food supply.

When chickens or turkeys catch bird flu, they typically get very ill quickly and affected farms are placed under quarantine by state regulators and depopulated, or culled, to prevent further spread of the infection.



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The FDA has published [guidelines](#) for raw food manufacturers that suggest using only ingredients that have been inspected by the USDA and passed for human consumption, but these recommendations are nonbinding and have no legal authority.

In December, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health issued an animal [health alert](#) that several indoor-only cats had died after consumption of raw pet foods and counseling veterinarians to ask owners about feeding raw products to their pets.

Los Angeles County also [advised](#) people not to feed their pets another raw brand, Monarch Raw Pet Food, after cats who ate it became ill with bird flu. Samples of the food, which had been sold at local farmers markets, also tested positive for H5 virus.

Northwest Naturals, a pet food company in Portland, Oregon, announced a voluntary recall of one batch of its 2-pound Feline Turkey Recipe raw frozen pet food after it tested positive for the virus. The product was sold in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Wisconsin, as well as Canada's British Columbia. The recalled food has "best if used by" dates of May 21, 2026, and June 23, 2026. Consumers should throw it away and contact the place of purchase for a refund.

In a [statement](#) on its website, the company said that it is "committed to the health and safety of pets and their owners" and that "there is currently no credible evidence to suggest that our raw food products are linked to avian influenza or any other health risks."

For weeks starting in December, California-based Raw Farm was [quarantined](#) and stopped producing and distributing its raw milk. California health officials warned consumers against drinking the products or feeding it pets. In [a statement](#) on its website, Raw Farm said "there are no illnesses associated with H5N1 in our products, but rather this is a political issue. There are no food safety issues with our products or consumer safety." It has since resumed sales after clearing the required tests.

There is a common belief that if it was processed correctly and refrigerated quickly, good bacteria in raw milk would "take care" of any harmful germs. This is a myth [according to](#) the FDA. Raw milk doesn't rid itself of dangerous pathogens. Studies [have shown](#) that the bird flu virus is present in high concentrations in milk from infected cows and can remain infectious for days.

Can H5N1 be passed from cats to humans?

It's possible, but there have been no known cases thus far. At the moment, H5N1 isn't very good at infecting people because the receptors it uses to enter cells don't match the receptors that most common in the human nose and throat. But that could change.



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How can I protect my cat from bird flu?

Cats appear to be particularly susceptible to severe illness and death. The good news is that infection can be prevented with a few simple practices:

- Cats should not drink unpasteurized dairy products or eat raw meat.
- Pet owners should keep cats away from wild birds, livestock and poultry.
- Don't let them wander freely in the outdoors. You don't know what they're getting into. Cats are natural hunters, and one of the animals they love to hunt are birds.
- Avoid touching sick or dead birds yourself. Thoroughly wash your hands after handling poultry or animals.

<https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-health/avian-influenza/avian-influenza-h5n1-cats>



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