

Raise healthy small flock poultry

As a bird owner, learn how to prevent disease and improve the health and well-being of your birds.

Introduction

Many people in Ontario own small flocks of poultry, such as:

- backyard chickens or other birds raised for meat and/or eggs
- hobby birds
- show/ornamental birds
- sport birds
- pet birds

Learning how to care for your birds is critical to their health and well-being. Disease prevention is one of the most important ways that you can help your birds.

Prevent and spot disease

Avian influenza and other diseases are an ongoing concern for the entire poultry industry, and the risk of disease transmission and outbreak is constantly present. As a small flock owner, it is important for you to use biosecurity measures to keep your birds healthy and to help stop the spread of disease. Biosecurity can be as simple as:

- learning how to spot the signs of disease
- keeping barns, cages, egg trays, feed and water dishes and all other equipment clean and disinfected
- separating new and returning birds from your other birds until you are sure they are disease-free
- keeping wild birds and other animals away from your birds, and away from your birds' feed and drinking water as wild migratory birds can carry disease and are a big risk to your birds

If you think a serious disease is present you should discuss it with your veterinarian, the Canada Food Inspection Agency or the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural

Affairs (OMAFRA). Reporting a disease will help authorities track diseases and help protect the whole poultry population.

Ways to limit the spread of disease

As a bird owner, you can help stop the spread of disease to other birds. Here are some ways you can do that:

- don't transport birds showing signs of disease
- have dedicated clothing and footwear meant only for being around your birds, and wear these clothes when you tend your flock
- don't take diseased birds to auctions, shows or fairs, or to any other place with other birds
- don't transport birds across provincial boundaries if they might be sick and/or when disease events are reported in Ontario
- print the ["Is Your Bird Sick" postcard](#) or the ["Stop! Is Your Bird Showing Signs of Disease" poster](#) and share at your next meeting or event

In addition to disease prevention, the health and well being of your birds can also be improved through better biosecurity practices. The following simple, inexpensive biosecurity recommendations can be very effective in preventing a serious disease outbreak and enhance overall bird health.

Restrict visitors and observe proper hygiene

Contaminated equipment and people can introduce many disease-causing agents, such as bacteria and viruses, to your flock. These microscopic organisms can be carried on boots, clothing and vehicles, even if they appear clean.

Good practices include:

- Restrict contact with your birds to those people caring for them. If you allow visitors, provide them with clean coveralls and boots.
- Do not allow people who own their own birds, or who have recently been in contact with other birds (for example, those who have visited another flock or attending a bird show) near your birds. To reduce the risk of introducing diseases to your flock, ensure that people caring for your birds (staff or volunteers) do not have birds of their own or attend events where birds are present.

- Wear separate clothing and footwear when dealing with your birds. Keep them at the entrance to the structure or enclosure.
- Wash and disinfect boots and any equipment that comes in contact with the birds or their droppings, such as shovels, scoops and brooms. Clean cages, food and water surfaces daily.
- Wash your hands thoroughly before and after dealing with your birds.

Prevent contact with wild birds

Wild birds carry many diseases, including avian influenza. Minimizing contact with wild species and their droppings will help protect your birds from these diseases.

Keep your birds in a screened-in area or preferably an enclosed structure where they do not have contact with wild birds. Screen all doors, windows and vents, and keep them in good repair.

Do not use water that may be contaminated with wild bird droppings, such as pond water, for your birds. Test your water at least once a year and use appropriate water sanitation such as chlorine. Keep feed in a tightly sealed container, protected from wild birds.

Practice proper rodent control

Rats and mice can spread disease to your birds, spoil feed, cause property damage and kill chicks, poults and other young birds. Mice can enter an enclosure through a hole the size of your little finger, and rats through a hole the size of your thumb.

Ways to control rodents include:

- Monitor your enclosure regularly for signs of rodents, such as droppings or chewed equipment. Mice will live in buildings once they gain entry, while rats live outside and enter looking for food.
- Clean up all garbage and debris surrounding your birds' enclosure, and keep tall grass and weeds mowed.
- Store feed in tightly sealed containers that a rodent cannot chew through, such as a steel garbage can with a tight-fitting lid or an old freezer.
- Place bait stations around the exterior of your poultry house to help control rodent populations.

Don't bring disease back to your flock

Mixing birds of different species and from different sources increases the risk of introducing disease to your flock. It is preferable to keep only birds of similar age and species together (all in/all out).

Try to:

- Minimize contact between groups by keeping them in separate locations if multiple ages and/or species are kept.
- Get complete background information, including a history of any diseases and vaccinations, for new birds added to your flock. Some vaccines, including some of those used to control infectious laryngotracheitis (ILT), can cause disease in unvaccinated birds. Consult your veterinarian regarding proper vaccination procedures.
- Keep new or returning birds separate (quarantined) for at least 2-4 weeks after returning home, and monitor them for signs of illness. Clean and disinfect cages and equipment used for these birds. Use separate clothing, footwear and equipment for quarantined birds, and handle them last. If the same equipment and clothing must be used, clean and disinfect them before and after handling the birds.
- Avoid sharing equipment and supplies with other bird owners. If this cannot be avoided, clean and disinfect the equipment before and after each use.

Practice proper deadstock management

Poor management of deadstock (of any species) draws scavengers like turkey vultures, coyotes and foxes to your farm. Diseases including High Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) can be brought onto your farm by both avian and other scavengers.

Proper deadstock management and biosecurity practices reduce the risk of disease spreading to your farm, spreading to wildlife or disease spreading to your neighbour's farms.

Things to remember:

- Do not cross contaminate clothing or equipment when handling deadstock.
- Do not leave any deadstock directly outside your barn. Move deadstock directly to your deadstock disposal site to prevent scavengers from accessing it and potentially spreading the virus.

- If you see scavengers on your property, your disposal site is not being managed properly.

Recognize and report any illness

Early detection is critical to successfully dealing with a disease outbreak.

If your birds show signs of disease, such as depression, abnormal egg production or feed consumption, sneezing, gasping, a discharge from the nose or eyes, diarrhea or sudden death, call your local veterinarian immediately.

Dispose of dead birds quickly using an approved method, such as burial or composting. Consult your veterinarian first, as he or she may wish to collect samples for laboratory diagnosis.

Raising poultry species, either for food or as a hobby, is part of Ontario's agricultural heritage. However, to minimize the risks this poses to food safety and to the commercial poultry industry, bird owners should recognize and follow good biosecurity practices.

More information

[Biosecurity for poultry shows](#) has great information for keeping your flock healthy both at home and when at poultry shows.

[Transport guidelines for small flock poultry owners](#) discusses key points to minimize stress and to improve transport for small flock poultry.

Related information

- [Animal health updates and veterinary advisories](#)
- [Avian influenza in poultry](#)
- [Biosecurity for poultry shows](#)
- [Biosecurity recommendations for commercial poultry flocks in Ontario](#)
- [Deadstock disposal options on-farm](#)
- [Mental health resources for farmers](#)
- [Ontario Animal Health Network](#)
- [Rodent control in livestock and poultry facilities](#)
- [House fly control in poultry barns](#)
- [Transport guidelines for small flock poultry owners](#)

- [How to prevent and detect disease in small flocks and pet birds](#)
- [Poultry Industry Council small flock avian influenza webinars 2022](#)
- [Small Flock Management - Mississippi State University](#)
- [Commercial Poultry - Manitoba Agriculture](#)

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