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EXPERT AVAILABLE: Recent Bird Flu Epidemic Calls for Increased Biosecurity, Expert Says

Poultry disease expert says poultry farms should avoid sharing equipment, workers

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COLUMBIA, Mo. – Recent outbreaks of highly contagious avian influenza, more commonly known as bird flu, have killed thousands of turkeys and chickens in poultry farms throughout the Midwest. This outbreak is causing egg shortages and could lead to increased turkey and chicken prices, especially around the holidays. Dan Shaw, a professor in the [University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine](#) and a specialist in poultry disease, says these outbreaks point to the need for more awareness and enhanced practice of biosecurity at poultry farms around the country.

“This strain of avian influenza, or H5N2, is very difficult to catch before it begins killing birds in large numbers,” Shaw said. “During previous past outbreaks, signs of infection, including depressed appetites, lethargy and ulceration of bare skin on infected birds, have allowed producers time to quarantine individual production houses. This strain gives little warning before birds begin dying, making it very difficult to stop the disease from spreading throughout whole farms. Within just a couple of days, poultry farms can go from healthy to completely devastated.”

Shaw says that experts believe this current outbreak of avian influenza is spread by waterfowl migrating from southern wintering grounds to nesting areas in Canada as the seasonal weather changes. Waterfowl, such as ducks, may be infected but do not develop severe disease. While infected, they can shed the virus in their droppings. The infected fowl stop at ponds and lakes which may be near poultry operations. It also has been theorized that infected droppings may contaminate chaff from grain fields where the birds have been feeding. This contaminated chaff can blow into nearby poultry farms and carry the virus. Shaw has suggestions for poultry farmers to help protect their flocks and prevent the spread of the disease.

“Obviously, poultry producers should focus on isolating their poultry flocks as much as possible,” Shaw said. “It is best to avoid sharing equipment and workers between farms. All shared equipment should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before being brought onto the farm and workers should change all outerwear and footwear before entering the premise. The practice of sharing equipment and workers, while cost-effective in the short term, could end up costing producers their entire stocks if the disease is spread between farms by a careless worker or infected piece of equipment. Producers should calculate the cost of losing their whole stock against the savings of sharing equipment. That may help them decide it is worthwhile to purchase their own equipment to help mitigate infection risk.”

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Dan Shaw is a professor in the MU College of Veterinary Medicine Department of Veterinary Pathobiology.

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Shaw says that with summer beginning and warmer weather allowing the waterfowl migration to continue north into Canada, there is hope the outbreak will begin to dissipate in the Midwest. However, Shaw says there are fears that the disease will return with the fall migration and possibly spread to other parts of the country. While influenza viruses have the ability to pass between species, including humans, Shaw says that there is currently no evidence that this particular strain will make such a jump. The Centers for Disease Control is monitoring the situation for indications of possible effects on human health.

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