

HSE information sheet

Avian Influenza: Avoiding the risk of infection on offshore installations

Offshore Information Sheet No 2/2007

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Introduction

This information sheet provides background information on the avian influenza risk in relation to the offshore sector and sets out the precautions to be taken in the event of an outbreak of avian influenza being declared in the UK.

It does not deal with contingency planning for a human influenza pandemic and information can be found on the HSE web site at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/diseases/pandemic.htm>

Background

In the offshore environment, there is potential for exposure to wild birds and their faecal material (guano), particularly on normally unattended installations (NUIs). Wild birds can carry bacteria and viruses that are infectious to people, resulting in diseases called zoonoses (eg Newcastle disease, chlamydiosis and campylobacteriosis). The bacteria and viruses can be transmitted to humans when contaminated dust and mist is generated, e.g. when cleaning guano in infected areas, by inhalation, ingestion or contamination of the eye through not washing hands after handling infected birds or contaminated equipment and clothing. Therefore, good occupational hygiene precautions should always be used in environments containing birds to avoid zoonotic infections.

Avian influenza is a virus that causes disease and is highly contagious in birds. Pigeons and wild or migratory birds, such as ducks, can become infected with the virus. The avian influenza A subtype H5N1 is a highly pathogenic (HPAI) strain of the virus that is endemic in bird populations across SE Asia, parts of Africa and has now emerged in some southern European countries. In the UK, previous incidents involving HPAI have been restricted to isolated outbreaks, which have been contained at the source of infection. However, there is a continuing risk of introduction of HPAI into the UK through migratory birds.

To date, bird to human transmission of H5N1 has been confirmed in a relatively few cases (272 cases as of 2/07) in Hong Kong, Thailand and Indonesia as a result of close habitation and direct contact with live, diseased poultry. Whilst the transmission of avian influenza to people is considered a rare event, the outcome can be serious and has resulted in 166 deaths as of 2/07. There are a limited number of reported cases of person-to-person spread but no evidence that the virus is easily transmissible between people. However, avian influenza can exchange genetic material with human influenza viruses in co-infected humans or susceptible animals to emerge as new viruses, which may be capable of being spread easily between people. This makes avian influenza a potential threat to public health and hence the need to protect those in close contacts with infected birds and to quickly control any outbreak.

Avoiding the risk of infection

The virus can be transmitted to humans, although this is a relatively rare event. It is important to note that almost all cases in humans to date have been due to close and direct contact with sick or infected domestic poultry and there is minimal health risk in catching avian influenza from wild birds. Consequently, the risks to human health in the offshore situation are considered to be extremely low and the precautions required to prevent zoonotic infections will also be effective against avian influenza.

General guidance on good occupational hygiene practice for such situations has been developed by a Government & Industry Working Group (see below). The personal protective equipment aspects of this guidance are aimed primarily at persons working commercially with poultry. The risks of infections from wild birds offshore are much lower as the work does not involve accessing enclosed areas containing high numbers of birds and associated faecal material. The use of

existing polycotton coveralls, boots, goggles, gloves and hard hats (with thorough cleaning after use) should be sufficient to minimize the risk of personal contamination. Respiratory protective equipment is unlikely to be necessary other than in circumstances where there is entry into enclosed areas containing birds or their faecal material. In these circumstances, entry should be avoided until cleaning and disinfection procedures have been completed using appropriate control measures.

Guidance on worker protection

A UK Government/Industry Working Group on worker protection against avian influenza has developed guidance for:

- [Avoiding the risk of zoonotic infections when working with poultry that is not suspected of having avian influenza](#)
- [Avoiding the risk of infection when working with poultry that is suspected of having highly pathogenic avian influenza \(HPAI\)](#)

Although the advice is targeted at people working with poultry in commercial undertakings, it is also relevant to other workers to inform the assessment of this risk.

Additional relevant guidance is available on the HSE website at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/biosafety/diseases/avianflu.htm> and the HSENI website at http://www.hseni.gov.uk/avian_flu_english-2.pdf, which provides appendices relating to putting on/taking off PPE and its decontamination as well as hand washing guidelines.

Additionally, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/diseases/notifiable/disease/ai/index.htm>, is a very useful source of information on all aspects of avian flu including health and safety information and guidance on reporting, handling and disposing of dead wild birds.

Action required

Duty holders should be aware of the avian influenza risk and should ensure that good occupational hygiene practice is followed, as already required to avoid other zoonotic infections, where people enter/work in areas containing birds or their faecal material.

Further information

Any queries relating to this information sheet should be addressed to:

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This information sheet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do