

## From the Ground Up

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### **Protecting your Backyard Poultry**

If you have backyard birds, you are well aware of the need to protect your flock from predators. As I used to tell 4-H youth in the poultry project, “what doesn’t like to eat chicken?” This could even include a beloved family pet deciding to have a dining experience with your birds. What you may not be aware of is another threat to the birds in your backyard—avian influenza. Avian Influenza (AI) is a highly contagious viral disease of birds caused by infection with the avian influenza Type A viruses and is deadly for domestic poultry.

How widespread is this issue? As of December 30, 2022 across the country, USDA was reporting 715 farms that had broken with AI (306 commercial farms and 409 backyard farms) with a loss of 57.82 million birds. This is more than the 50 million birds lost in the 2015 AI outbreak and has played a major role in the increase in egg prices in the market.

Dr. Tom Tabler, University of Tennessee Poultry Specialist, has provided information concerning this disease. These viruses occur naturally in wild aquatic birds all over the world. Most of Tennessee is under the migratory flyway for these waterfowl who, even when infected, may show little or no symptoms while shedding the virus along the way through feces and respiratory secretions. These birds may land where your chickens roam or may simply “make deposits” as they fly. Once the virus reaches the ground, people and other animals may unknowingly step in those “deposits” and spread the virus to defenseless domestic birds.

There is no treatment or cure once a domestic bird becomes infected; consequently, a strong biosecurity program is the best defense. And keep in mind that these biosecurity practices need to become habits—they are important regardless of avian influenza status. Remember, the virus doesn’t get to your birds unless it is carried or dropped there. What can be done? Begin a solid biosecurity program. Isolate your birds from all other birds (wild and domestic). Change clothes, shoes, etc. before entering the coop. Better yet, reserve shoes and perhaps even coveralls to wear only when with your birds. You may consider disposable plastic boots to slip over shoes when entering the coop and throw them away when exiting. Control and limit traffic near the flock. Don’t let someone (including yourself) enter the coop if they have been around other birds without showering and changing clothes.

How can the disease be recognized? In the beginning it may look like any other respiratory disease. However, a sudden increase in mortality is a good indication you may be dealing with AI. Call the Tennessee State Veterinarian’s Office for guidance and assistance if you suspect AI. Their office number is 615-837-5120. Just as you may place a fence or enclosure around the flock to protect from predators, a good biosecurity program will place another valuable barrier for their protection.