

# POULTRY NEWS

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## Many countries report worst ever outbreaks of avian flu

THE WORLDWIDE avian flu epidemic has increased the opportunity for avian viruses to mix and mutate and for human infection, scientists have said.

"The concern with influenza viruses is that their characteristics can change dramatically in very short periods of time," said Eleanor Riley, professor of immunology and infectious disease at the University of Edinburgh.

"If a highly pathogenic strain of avian influenza gets mixed with a strain capable of human-to-human transmission, we may have the next pandemic on our hands, and it won't just be the chickens that are locked down."

Many countries have reported their worst ever outbreaks. In the US, poultry farms in at least 29 states have been hit and more than 27 million chickens and turkeys have died or been destroyed since the first case in February. Thirty-four European countries have been affected, with Germany hit the worst (1,066 cases in wild and captive birds), followed by France (978), the UK (409) and the Netherlands (240).

In the US, Europe and the UK all the infections have been the H5N1 strain, which doesn't readily spread to humans. But one case of human infection was reported in the UK, while in the US an unnamed prisoner contracted the infection in April.

In China the H3N8 strain of bird flu was detected in humans for the first time when a four-year-old boy was infected after contact with chickens. He is reported not to be seriously ill.

"We often see a virus spread to a human and then not spread any further, so a single case isn't a cause of great concern," Sir Peter Horby, a professor at the University of Oxford, told *The Guardian*.

However, he and other disease experts said that the widespread transmission of avian flu across the UK, US and Europe was concerning.



The UK's hens were allowed out again on 2 May, but the AIPZ remains in force across the country

## 'Flockdowns' could become an annual occurrence experts say

BRITAIN'S POULTRY-keepers should plan for annual 'flockdowns', chicken experts and Defra have suggested.

After six months of captivity, the UK's hens were allowed out to range again on 2 May, but with avian flu circulating in Europe's wild birds these mandatory housing measures could become an annual occurrence and smallholders need to be prepared.

"At present, it is too early to say how many years this virus will continue to circulate. Historically, when this type of event has occurred in Europe, the virus may still circulate for several years," a Defra spokesman told *Country Smallholding*, adding that the current avian flu outbreak is not an end.

"The Avian Influenza Prevention Zone (AIPZ) remains in force across the UK until further notice, with only the housing measures component being lifted. This means that while birds are allowed to range outside, all bird-keepers (whether they have pet birds, a commercial, or a backyard flock) must continue to take effective and precautionary biosecurity measures until further notice."

The 2021/22 bird flu epidemic has been the worst the UK has ever known, with 109 cases (as *Country Smallholding* went to press) in captive birds since October last year.

According to Defra figures, from October to December the majority of cases were at commercial egg and broiler premises, but in

later months (January to April) this switched to a wider range of premises, including more backyard keepers.

Jane Howorth, founder of the British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT), said: "Over the past few years, we've seen AI becoming a more regular occurrence and restrictions being in place for longer periods of time. We're now looking to adapt our adoption policy to include the need to consider creating a winter garden that's safe and suitable for pet hens should there be more bird lockdowns in the future.

"We would still encourage those planning to welcome hens into their homes to do so. Even under cover, pet chickens can bring you huge joy and live a fulfilling life. AI is just something that potential hen-keepers need to be aware of and prepare for."

The BHWT has created some tips for providing a safe, attractive outdoor space that is beneficial for hens during avian flu restrictions:

- Have as big a space as possible, ideally high enough to walk in and attached to or incorporating the hen house so that hens can be let straight out into it.
- Use a covered run that is solid if possible, a tarpaulin, or very fine mesh so that wild bird droppings can't pass through.
- Any mesh fencing needs to be a small enough gauge to stop wild birds getting in and out.
- If possible, build freestanding perches or a climbing frame to provide entertainment.