

Paramyxovirus fact sheet for bird owners

The current situation

A paramyxovirus not previously reported in Australia has been detected by Victorian authorities in hobby pigeons near Shepparton and in north-western suburbs of Melbourne. This paramyxovirus is not bird flu.

Affected pigeon flocks have experienced high mortality with a combination of the clinical signs listed opposite.

Paramyxovirus strains are generally capable of affecting other avian species. At this stage, the disease has only been detected in pigeons. There is no evidence at this stage that this disease has spread to poultry.

If this avian paramyxovirus were to infect poultry it would cause Newcastle disease. Commercial poultry in Victoria are vaccinated against Newcastle disease and properties implement good biosecurity practices so greatly reducing their risk. Owners of backyard poultry are unlikely to have vaccinated birds so are advised to follow good biosecurity practices. There is no vaccine registered for use in pigeons in Australia.

Are my pets at risk?

There is no threat to dogs, cats and other non-avian species that come into contact with infected pigeons.

Does the disease affect humans?

Human infection with this virus is extremely rare and usually occurs only in people who have close direct contact with infected birds. The virus causes only mild, short-term conjunctivitis or influenza-like symptoms in humans. If you experience these symptoms, contact your doctor.

Reporting sick or dead birds

It is also important that bird owners report any groups of sick or dead birds to their local veterinarian or to the Department of Primary Industries on the Customer Service Centre on 136 186.

DPI will cover the cost of the laboratory testing for this avian paramyxovirus, but not consultation or other disease testing fees.

Advice to bird owners

Owners of birds can minimise the risk of introducing disease by implementing good biosecurity measures, including preventing contact with other racing, fancy and wild pigeons, both directly and indirectly, for example via feed and water.

Other simple biosecurity measures that will help prevent disease outbreaks include:

- keeping equipment and poultry yards or aviaries clean
- practising good hygiene if attending bird shows
- cleaning and disinfecting common tools, footwear and clothing between aviaries or properties
- restricting contact between pet birds and wild birds including not participating in races, shows or exhibitions
- limiting visitors to your birds
- preventing contamination of food and water by faeces or other animal waste
- quarantining new birds

Detergent is suitable for disinfection. Thoroughly clean away any organic material such as faeces/dirt/litter and allow the area to soak with soapy water for 10 minutes.

What are the clinical signs?

Signs of paramyxovirus include those below, but not all signs will be seen in all birds:

- high morbidity (sick) and high mortality (death) rate
- loss of appetite
- lethargy
- respiratory signs
- gastrointestinal signs including regurgitation and diarrhoea
- neurological signs such as head shaking

Affected birds often die within 72 hours.