



**FSS Láirionad Faire
um Chosaint Sláinte**
25 - 27 Sráid
Ghairdinéir, Baile Átha
Cliath, D01A4A3, Éire

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13th June 2024

Deputy Paul Murphy,
Dáil Éireann,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2

Re: To ask the Minister for Health if his Department is actively monitoring the H5N1 outbreaks in farm animals in the United States; if the HSPC is actively monitoring for H5N1 in Ireland; if his Department is collaborating with relevant international organisations to assess potential risks and impact to public health in Ireland; if he will outline the efforts being undertaken by his Department to address the possibility of an H5N1 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter

Dear Deputy Murphy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

The National Health Protection Office (NHPO) and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) is actively monitoring the reported an outbreak of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) H5N1 influenza in cattle in the United States, following an initial report on 1/4/2024, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). To date three associated human cases of H5N1 have been detected in the US – all had direct contact with infected cattle or their milk, all have had very mild disease all have made full and uneventful recoveries. Disease in cattle has been mild. The most likely source of disease in cattle in the US was infected local wild birds. The USFDA considers the US retail pasteurised milk and milk product supply to be safe for human consumption. Unlike in the US, the level of circulating HPAI H5N1 in wild birds in Europe is low.

The HPSC has a range of surveillance methods and systems to detect emergent respiratory infections, including H5N1, in Ireland, (in line with WHO recommendations) including:

- Continual Horizon Scanning/Development of Epidemic Intelligence around HPAI (including reports from international partners in WHO, ECDC, UKHSA and CDC (USA));
- Statutory surveillance and reporting of influenza as a long-established part of the national Influenza Surveillance System
- Surveillance of Influenza-Like Illness (ILI) through the GP Sentinel Surveillance Scheme
- The Severe Acute Respiratory Infection (SARI) Surveillance System identifies and reports cases of severe respiratory infection
- The National Virus reference laboratory has implemented protocols to ensure testing of specific high risk influenza samples for HPAI.

In relation to international collaboration and risk assessment of potential public health impact in Ireland, the NHPO continues to conduct a Dynamic Public Health Risk Assessment (DPHRA), informed by national and international epidemiological and other intelligence. The HSE also contributes case and laboratory data to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and



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Control (ECDC) and contributes to the development of EU/EEA guidance and protocols related to HPAI. Currently, the ECDC, in line with WHO and the UN Food and Agriculture Agency, considers this incident to be low risk for the European general population and a low-moderate risk for individuals occupationally exposed to infected animals. Ireland's latest national DPHRA for the Irish population aligns closely with those of ECDC and WHO. H5N1 has not been detected in cattle in Europe/UK, and the strain of H5N1 responsible for the incident in US has not been detected in Europe/UK. In the UK also, the overall risk to the UK population has been assessed to be very low or low. The HSE liaises closely with counterparts in Northern Ireland (NI) and works to develop shared approaches and protocols relating to HPAI. Unlike in the US, Europe is in a period of low H5N1 activity in wild animals and birds. HSE/DAFM routinely advise members of the public to avoid contact with animals that are sick or dead to minimise potential transmission of H5N1. When we enter our next high activity H5N1 period, that messaging will move to a more active form to minimise such contact and inadvertent spillover of H5N1 from animals to humans in Ireland.

In relation to public health action in relation to the possibility of an H5N1 pandemic, on 14/5/2024, there was a meeting of the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) National Coordination Group – jointly chaired by HSE's NHPO and DAFM, with involvement of the FSAI and other subject matter experts. This is a subcommittee of the One Health Oversight Committee (co-Chaired by the CMO and the CVO). Work is ongoing to update current H5N1 National Guidance to reflect developments in the US in conjunction with stakeholders from HSE, DAFM and FSAI. A Tabletop exercise to test our capability to respond to an HPAI pandemic has already been delivered last June (2023) in partnership with counterparts from Northern Ireland and learning from that event has informed the development of our current guidance published in November 2023 ([Management of contacts of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b](#))

HSE is also updating its national Operational Pandemic Plan which is in late-stage preparation, with an intention to deliver a pandemic command post exercise based on the introduction of H5N1 into the Irish human population, to test capacity to respond and control described in the updated Pandemic Plan.

If you require any further information or clarification, please do contact us.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Éamonn O'Moore,
Director of National Health Protection
HSE Public Health
IMC No 015507