Update: Avian Influenza: Food safety, response, and occupational health guidance for dairy processors in British Columbia

June 16, 2025

This is an update of the information that was sent June 5, 2024. There is new information from the Ministry of Agriculture that we want you to be aware of. There are a few additional updates.

Dairy processing and food safety

As part of the Government of Canada's One Health approach, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) in collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) and Health Canada, is taking proactive measures to monitor Canadian dairy cows for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) (CFIA, 2025).

The BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food (BC MAF), in consultation with the BC Milk Marketing Board (BCMMB) and BC Dairy, will be testing raw milk samples from dairy cows for HPAI from approximately 55 milk routes per month. This will be accomplished by testing load samples collected from co-mingled milk at the last farm on the milk routes designated for testing. This equates to each producer in BC being tested for HPAI at least once every three months. A traceback protocol will be initiated in the event of a positive test result to identify the positive farm, with confirmatory testing being completed by the CFIA. Testing by BC MAF began in May 2025, and will take place in the second week of each month thereafter. The BCMMB will be communicating results to all producers through their monthly production notice.

We understand that milk processors may have questions regarding HPAI in milk and milk products, and how the detection of HPAI in milk or herds in BC may affect their facility.

Evidence on milk and milk product safety

Avian influenza, particularly the H5N1 strain, is primarily a disease of birds, but rare detections in livestock (including dairy cattle in parts of the U.S.) have raised concerns. While **no cases have been detected in British Columbia (BC) dairy cattle**, processors should be ready to implement proactive controls to mitigate risks.

It is important to note that pasteurization kills pathogens, including influenza viruses, that may be present in raw milk. Sale of raw milk is not permitted in BC and the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) continues to advise strongly against the consumption of raw milk. For more detailed information, refer to the Dairy Safety guidance. The CFIA and Health Canada carried out a study in May and June 2024 to re-confirm effectiveness of

pasteurization to inactivate HPAI virus in milk, even if fragments of the virus remain (CFIA, 2025). The results confirmed pasteurization is effective. The CFIA issued a letter to Dairy Farmers of Canada and Dairy Processors Association of Canada indicating it is acceptable for bulk tank milk from a farm identified with HPAI to be collected, provided the bulk tank milk is sent for pasteurization. Additional information is available on Health Canada's website: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) and food safety.

When HPAI viruses are present in the raw milk of infected cattle, there is limited information available on whether these viruses can be transmitted to humans through raw milk or raw milk products, such as unpasteurized cheese. In Canada, unpasteurized (raw) milk cheeses undergo an aging process that may inactivate some bacteria and viruses, but some pathogens may still survive. There is ongoing research by the US Food and Drug Administration (US FDA) to determine if aging raw milk cheese can reduce or eliminate viable H5N1 virus.

Recommendation for BC dairy processors

Our interim recommendation, in line with the US FDA, is that dairy processors should not manufacture or sell raw/unpasteurized milk cheese products made with milk from any premises where there has been suspected or confirmed HPAI in cattle within the last 30 days. Instead, milk from these farms should be pasteurized. BC MAF and the BCMMB will directly notify receiving processors when HPAI is suspected or confirmed in cattle. Contact your dairy plant inspector if you have any further questions or concerns about food safety.

For more detailed information, refer to the Dairy Safety page, and the Government of Canada's update on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. These sources will provide comprehensive and up-to-date information on the safety of milk and milk products.

Quick Facts

- Only milk from healthy dairy cattle or other livestock enters BC’s commercial milk supply chain as according to Milk Industry Act Section 3 (2); Milk Industry Standards Regulation Section 10 (2) and Section 10 (2.1).
- Current evidence strongly suggests that HPAI is not a food safety concern for commercially pasteurized dairy products. Pasteurization of commercial milk products kills pathogens, including influenza viruses, found in raw milk.
- As of May 30, 2025, CFIA laboratories have tested 1,211 commercial milk samples for HPAI viral fragments across Canada and 4003 raw milk samples, including 300 commercial milk and 1147 raw milk samples from Western provinces. All samples have tested negative.
- CFIA enhanced import requirements on dairy cattle from the US as of April 29, 2024.

Occupational health updates for dairy workers

Highly pathogenic avian influenza in people

- HPAI rarely infects people, but infections can happen when HPAI enters the body through the mouth, eyes, or nose. Symptoms range from minimal or mild influenza-like illness (e.g., fever, sore throat, muscle aches) and conjunctivitis (eye redness) to severe illness resulting in hospitalization or death.
- HPAI has been detected in dairy cattle and raw milk in the US. **People can be exposed to HPAI from infected dairy cattle, their raw milk, and contaminated equipment or environments.**
- Rare HPAI infections in people are usually linked to close, prolonged, and unprotected contact with infected birds or their environments. There has also been HPAI infections in farm workers in the US following direct and close exposure to sick dairy cattle and their milk.
- HPAI in birds, mammals, and people are closely monitored because the virus can adapt and gain the ability to infect and spread between people more easily.
- If you develop symptoms of influenza-like illness within 10 days after exposure, tell your health care provider that you have been in contact with animals and are concerned about avian influenza. This will help them give you appropriate advice on testing and treatment.

Prevention

- Prevent exposure to HPAI by avoiding direct, close, or unprotected contact with:
    - Raw milk and raw milk handling equipment
    - Sick or dead birds, livestock, or other animals who may be infected with HPAI.
    - Feces and litter
    - Surfaces and water that might be contaminated with animal excretions from potentially infected birds, livestock, or other animals.
- **Refer to WorkSafe BC workplace policies and procedures for dairy processing and dairy farms workers, and WorkSafeBC and AgSafe guidance on avian influenza prevention.** Exposure to the HPAI can be reduced with the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), including:
    - Respirators
    - Rubber or disposable gloves
    - Eye protection (e.g., goggles, face shields, safety glasses)
    - Disposable gown or coveralls
    - Rubber boots or disposable protective shoe/boot covers.
- Wash your hands often and avoid touching your face when working with above. Do not eat, drink, smoke, vape, chew gum, dip tobacco, or use the bathroom while wearing PPE.
- Clean, disinfect, or dispose of contaminated clothing, equipment, or surfaces.

- The avian influenza virus is susceptible to detergents and sanitizers used in dairy plants. Review and follow your sanitation program to clean and sanitize your raw milk handling equipment and processing areas.
- Support public health follow-up of infected dairy farms and plants. Public health will contact infected dairy plants and farms to follow-up on exposed individuals and provide:
    - Risk assessment based on the nature of exposure, personal protective measures, presence of flu-like symptoms, and seasonal influenza vaccination status.
    - Guidance regarding symptom monitoring, testing, and treatment, including antiviral prophylaxis (medication to prevent onset of illness).
- Prepare for public health follow-up by being ready to share:
    - A visitor log of persons entering the dairy plant with their contact information and date of visit.
    - Biosecurity and dairy plant standard operating procedures.

Seasonal influenza vaccine ("flu shot")

- People who interact with animals that may be infected with HPAI or have had contact with contaminated material are recommended to receive the seasonal influenza vaccine, or the "flu shot".
- The flu shot protects against seasonal (human) influenza rather than avian influenza. However, it helps prevent the development of new influenza viruses, which can occur when a person is infected with both human and avian influenza at the same time.
- The flu shot is available annually starting in the fall and throughout the respiratory season (typically March).

Resources

- AgSafe – Avian Influenza Exposure Prevention Safe Work Practice
- BCCDC – Avian Influenza
- BCCDC – Dairy Safety
- BC MAF – Biosecurity Requirements for Milk Pick-Up
- CCOHS – Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety - Protecting Yourself from Avian Influenza A(H5N1) in Dairy Cattle
- CFIA – The Government of Canada provides an update on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza
- WorkSafe BC – Avian influenza exposure when handling raw milk at dairy processing plants
- WorkSafe BC – Infectious Diseases: Avian Flu
- WorkSafe BC – Health and Safety for Dairy Farms

For further information, please contact fpinfo@bccdc.ca