

When to Suspect HPAI (H5N1) in Cats

HPAI (H5N1) is a zoonotic influenza A virus that can cause severe neurologic and respiratory disease in cats. It has also infected dairy cattle, numerous wild mammal species, and occasionally humans. Mortality may exceed 70% in clinically affected cats, making early recognition, isolation, and reporting critical.

Key Exposures

- Reported cases of avian flu in the area
- Exposure to dead or infected wild birds, poultry, or rodents
- Exposure to other infected mammals (e.g., dairy cattle, other cats)
- Consumption of raw or unpasteurized products
- Owner/household member works with poultry, dairy cattle, livestock, wildlife, or animal processing
- Contact with contaminated equipment, footwear, bedding, or livestock environments
- Multiple cats in the same household, shelter, colony, or feeding group becoming ill within a short period

Ask about raw diets / raw milk. Don't overlook HPAI in neurologic cats. Consider rabies as a differential diagnosis.

Course of Illness

- Acute or peracute onset
- Rapid clinical deterioration (often 24-72 hours)
- Poor or no response to antibiotic or other supportive therapy

Protect Your Team

If HPAI (H5N1) is suspected, isolate the cat and use personal protective equipment (PPE) for all interactions, including intake, examination, treatment, sample collection, cleaning, and necropsy.

Recommended PPE:

- N95 respirator/mask (preferably fit-tested)
- Eye protection (goggles or face shield; not eyeglasses)
- Latex or nitrile disposable gloves
- Fluid-resistant gown or coveralls
- Boot covers or dedicated footwear
- Head cover (e.g., surgical cap)

Clinical Signs



Systemic

- Fever
- Lethargy
- Dehydration



GI

- Anorexia
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea



Respiratory

- Dyspnea
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Oculonasal discharge



Neurologic

- Ataxia
- Circling
- Tremors
- Seizures

Contact your diagnostic laboratory, State Animal Health Official, and/or State Public Health Veterinarian when HPAI (H5N1) is suspected.



How to Manage a Suspected or Confirmed Case

- Physically isolate the cat and limit their movement or transport
- At home, the cat should be confined to a separate room until 5 days after clinical signs resolve
- Disinfect the cat's litter trays, bowls, baskets, and other items
- Perform hand hygiene after handling the cat and remove contaminated clothing and shoes