

## **Avian Influenza: Concerns with Raw (and Freeze Dried) Diets with Cats**

Avian Influenza has been a recent concern with cats. While not airborne and infectious directly between mammals, we have seen cats nationwide infected directly via exposure to birds, their feces, infected raw milk, and potentially through exposure to other animals (rodents, e.g.) that may carry the virus as well.

There have been two recent outbreaks, one in Oregon and another in Southern California, due to two frozen raw diets that are commercially available. Another outbreak, killing 20 large cats, occurred at a Tiger Sanctuary in Washington, suspected to be due to infected poultry being fed to them.

A question regarding freeze-dried diets or treats for cats being a source of Avial Influenza was brought to me the other day. The short answer is “Possibly.” Freeze dried diets can be cooked or raw. If cooked, they should be as safe as any other processed or cooked meat. However, if they are a freeze-dried raw diet, then the risk is very high. These should be avoided if possible.

You may ask yourself “Why all of the fuss, it is just the Flu!” Unfortunately, the reason for the fuss is the fact that the H5N1 strain of flu that is currently infecting birds has a 70% fatality rate with cats who are infected. Unfortunately, this strain of influenza has a high propensity to move into cats’ brains, causing a high mortality rate secondary to meningitis.

Unfortunately, we do not have a “cure” in cats with confirmed influenza. Tamiflu can be used, but no research has shown that it is effective in cats. Other than that, supportive care is the only option. Fortunately, we are not seeing an outbreak in cats, with only 49 cats in the U.S being confirmed with it in 2024. That being said, the U.S. has already seen 13 cats positive in January 2025 alone, and we will likely see more elevated numbers as testing becomes done more frequent.

In this case, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of protection. As no vaccine exists, the next best thing is to prevent exposure. You can limit exposure outside to prevent possible ingestion of birds or rodents that can possibly infect your cat. It is also recommended to avoid exposure to bird feces, so eliminating feeding birds near where your cats may be or you may track through is recommended as well. Lastly, avoid feeding raw diets, regardless of whether they are fresh, frozen, freeze-dried, or contain raw dairy products.

We currently know that all human cases in the US have not been due to airborne infections (human to human). But, if it is ever confirmed that airborne exposure starts to occur, please do not forget our furry friends when sick. If such a thing occurs, try to quarantine away from our cats until we are fully recovered. Lastly, if your kitty is not eating and severely lethargic, both with or without respiratory signs, it is recommended to call your veterinarian and schedule an examination!

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