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To: Wisconsin Clinicians, Infection Preventionists, Tribal Health Centers, and Local Health Departments, HERC Directors, Coroners/Medical Examiners

From: Ryan Westergaard, MD, Ph.D.
Chief Medical Officer and State Epidemiologist for Communicable Disease

Influenza Testing For Novel Influenza And Variant Influenza A Viruses

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Summary

With the 2026 county fair and agricultural exhibition season now underway, there are increased opportunities for human exposure to both variant influenza A viruses and highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1). Increased human exposure to potentially infected swine may increase the risk of variant influenza A, which include Influenza A(H3N2)v, A(H1N2)v, and A(H1N1)v. Exposure to poultry and dairy cattle increases the risk of H5N1 infection.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) recommends influenza testing for novel influenza and variant influenza A viruses among patients with acute respiratory illnesses (ARI) who report exposure to swine, cattle, or sick or dying birds. This memo provides clinical and laboratory guidance regarding testing criteria, specimen collection protocols, and specimen transport instructions.

Background

In past spring and summer seasons, outbreaks of avian influenza A(H5N1) have been identified in wild birds and commercial and backyard bird flocks nationwide. Since September 2022, 48 infected poultry flocks have been detected in Wisconsin with the last detection occurring in March 2026. H5N1 has also been identified in cattle and other mammal species on farms in multiple states. To date, there has been only one detection of avian influenza A in a dairy herd in the state of Wisconsin. Since February 2024, CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) has confirmed 71 human influenza A(H5N1) infections in the U.S. among farm workers or people involved with depopulation of infected birds, including one case in a Wisconsin resident.

Most commonly, human infections with variant influenza viruses occur in people with exposure to infected swine (for example, children exposed to swine at an agricultural fair, people who raise swine, or workers in the swine industry). Most variant influenza A virus infections do not result in subsequent

person-to-person spread; however, rare cases of limited spread of variant influenza viruses from person-to-person have occurred.

While the overall risk of human infection is low, exposure to influenza A(H5N1) avian flu virus and swine flu variant viruses can lead to human infections.

Testing criteria

It is important for clinicians to consider influenza testing among patients with ARI or conjunctivitis who within 10 days prior to illness onset report exposure to swine, cattle, or sick or dying birds. The testing criteria include:

Avian influenza:

- Direct exposure to sick or dying birds (touching, holding), **or**
- Indirect exposure to sick or dying birds (feeding, cleaning waste, being in close proximity to their environment).

Variant influenza A:

- Direct exposure to swine or cattle (showing, raising, feeding, cleaning waste, or having physical contact), **or**
- Indirect exposure to swine or cattle (in a building that houses swine or cattle or attendance at an event where swine or cattle are present).

ARI is defined as any **two** of the following conditions: fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, or nasal congestion.

In-house testing, including rapid influenza diagnostic tests to identify influenza A, are discouraged for samples from patients with known contact with affected birds or dairy cattle. Specimens should be sent to the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene (WSLH) for testing. Please contact the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Division of Public Health (DPH) to obtain approval for fee exempt testing at WSLH. Courier services are available for shipment of specimens to WSLH at no charge (see below).

To obtain approval for testing or if you have questions regarding this memo, contact Wisconsin Respiratory Epidemiologists at dhsrespiratoryvirus@dhs.wisconsin.gov or call the Bureau of Communicable Diseases at 608-267-9003.

Specimen collection

The following information is applicable for both avian influenza and variant influenza A testing. More details specific to avian influenza and variant influenza A are provided in subsequent sections.

Upper respiratory tract specimens should be collected using swabs with a synthetic tip (for example, polyester or Dacron®) and an aluminum or plastic shaft. Specimen collection and shipping supplies are available at no cost. Contact the WSLH Clinical Orders Department at 800-862-1088 or email HMSpecimenreceivingclinicalordersstaff@slh.wisc.edu to request supplies.

To collect eye specimens for patients with conjunctivitis, reflect back the lower eyelid of the affected eye and roll the swab across the conjunctiva. If sampling both eyes, a separate swab should be used for each eye. An [instructional video](#) is available online.

Specimens submitted for testing must include a completed WSLH Enhanced Surveillance Requisition Form. Once testing has been approved by DPH, please request an enhanced requisition form from WSLH.

Specimen collection for avian influenza:

- Patients who meet the testing criteria for avian influenza should have a nasopharyngeal (NP) swab, **and** a nasal swab combined with an oropharyngeal swab (two swabs collected separately). If the recommended specimens can't be collected, a single NP, oropharyngeal, or nasal swab is acceptable.
- The NP swab should be placed in a tube with viral transport medium (VTM), and the combined nasal and oropharyngeal swab should be placed in a separate tube containing VTM.
- Patients with conjunctivitis should have a conjunctival swab collected in addition to the defined upper respiratory tract specimens. The conjunctival swab should be placed into a separate tube of VTM. To sample the conjunctivae, clinicians should use a flocked swab with a flexible shaft (the same swab types used for NP testing).
- All specimens should be sent to the WSLH for testing.

Specimen collection for variant influenza A:

- A patient who meets the variant influenza A testing criteria should have the following specimens collected: a nasopharyngeal swab and a nasal aspirate or wash, or a combined nasopharyngeal swab with oropharyngeal swab. If these specimens cannot be collected, a nasal swab or oropharyngeal swab is acceptable.
- Specimens should be placed in separate tubes with VTM.
- Patients with conjunctivitis should have a conjunctival swab collected in addition to the defined upper respiratory tract specimen. The conjunctival swab should be placed into a separate tube of VTM. To sample the conjunctivae, clinicians should use a flocked swab with a flexible shaft (the same swab types used for NP testing).
- All specimens should be sent to the WSLH for testing.

Specimen packaging (WSLH Kit # 18 or equivalent)

- Triple package as “Biological substance, Category B/UN 3373” if classified as Category B.
- Securely tape the cap of the specimen container, wrap specimen with absorbent material, place the specimen vial into a biohazard bag, and place the completed requisition form into the outer pocket of the bag.
- Place the bagged specimen and form in the Styrofoam mailer with a frozen cold pack and cushioning.
- Replace lid on the Styrofoam/cardboard box; close and securely tape the cardboard box shut.
- Attach the WSLH address label to the package:
**Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene
Specimen Receiving, Communicable Disease
Division 2601 Agriculture Drive
Madison, WI 53718**
- Attach the “*Biological substance, Category B / UN 3373*” label to the package.
- Attach *return address* label.
- Include the *name and telephone number* of the person who knows the content of the package (requirement) with the return address.

Shipping arrangements

- The WSLH has a courier contract with Purple Mountain Solutions for shipment of specimens to the WSLH at no charge to the sender. **You are not required to ship via Purple Mountain unless you wish to have the transport charges billed to the WSLH.***
- Specimens will be picked up during regular working hours, but you must confirm the time with the Purple Mountain scheduler. Call by noon for same day pick up.
- Specimens will be delivered to the WSLH the following day. **If you must ship on Fridays or on the day before a holiday, include an extra frozen cold pack.**
- All package preparation should be completed before the courier arrives.
- Contact Purple Mountain directly to arrange for a pick-up:
 - **Call: 800-990-9668**
 - **Website: <https://purplemountainsolutions.com/>**
 - Same day delivery may be available for specific high priority specimens. **However, pre-approval from WSLH is required by calling the customer service department at 800-862-1013.**

***NOTE: This fee exempt courier account is for approved surveillance specimens or other specimens specifically requested by WSLH. The fee exempt courier is not available for transport of unapproved or unrequested samples.**