

Kalangala locals eating suspected flu-infected birds

Concern. Kalangala, Wakiso and Masaka districts have registered massive deaths of migrant birds infected by the deadly Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) type H5N1.

BY MONITOR TEAM
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KAMPALA. Residents living on the shores of Lake Victoria in Kalangala District are capturing weakened migrant birds and eating them despite the Health ministry's warning that such birds can pass the deadly birds flu onto humans.

Kalangala, Wakiso and Masaka districts have registered massive deaths of migrant birds infected by the deadly Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) type H5N1.

KEY QUESTIONS

What is bird flu or avian influenza or H5N1?

It's an influenza virus that causes a highly infectious, severe respiratory disease that affects both birds and humans.

How does it spread to humans?

Through close contact with infected live or dead birds or their faecal matter.

Why is there so much concern over the disease?

The disease has a high mortality rate.

What are the symptoms?

They include high fever, malaise, cough, sore throat, and muscle aches and, sometimes, abdominal pain, chest pain and diarrhoea.

Is it safe to eat chicken, poultry products and other wild game birds?

Yes, if properly prepared and cooked. The virus dies at temperatures above 70°C.

How is avian influenza in humans treated?

The antiviral medicine, oseltamivir, can reduce the severity of illness and prevent death.

It is the first time that the bird flu type H5N1 has been reported in birds in Uganda. This strain of the disease, one of three types, affects humans, animals and birds, according to UN health agency WHO.

Humans contract the disease through close contact with infected poultry or with objects contaminated by their faecal matter, according to the global health agency.

Incidences of island district residents eating the dead or weak birds were reported in Jaana and Buyange islands in Bubeke Sub-county, Kalangala District.

Mr Samuel Mutimba, a resident in the area, said they have been trapping and catching some of the bird species that migrate to the islands for food.

"These birds are part of our food. We have been eating them for ages," Mr Mutimba said.

Mr Richard Lule, a resident on Jaana Island, said he saw some of his colleagues picking up birds around the rocky island.

"I have seen some of our colleagues here picking up these birds and some have told us that they are sweet," Mr Lule said.

Bubeke Sub-county is a known bird sanctuary and harbours close to 923 bird species. Most of the birds are found in Nsirwe Island, which is close to Jaana Island.

Kalangala District health inspectors yesterday visited the affected areas and collected the dead and weak birds and culled them in an effort to stop the spread of the bird flu.

The Kalangala District health officer, Mr Hillary Bitakaramire, said precautions and guidelines have been disseminated to health officials in Bubeke Sub-county to ensure the residents are safe.

The health inspectors also held awareness meetings with the locals



Alerted. Poultry farmers are under panic after the Ministry of Health announced an outbreak of Avian flu in birds. PHOTO BY RACHEL MABALA

warning them against eating or having contact with the dead birds.

What they say...



"Although this is bird flu, caused by a virus, human infection can sometimes occur, and 60 per cent of the affected cases die."

PROF ANTHONY MBONYE, THE DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR HEALTH SERVICES



"We suspect some of the birds from Europe were infected and began dying on arrival in Uganda."

DR DIANA ATWINE, PS HEALTH MINISTRY

Prof Anthony Mbonye, the director general for health services yesterday warned the public against touching such birds and eating their meat suspected to have the deadly virus.

"Although this is bird flu, caused by a virus, human infection can sometimes occur, and 60 per cent of the affected cases die. The H5N1 virus in humans causes typical flu like symptoms, such as fever greater than 38 centigrade, sore throat, runny nose, headache, cough and chest pain," Prof Mbonye said.

Symptoms

Prof Mbonye added that patients of bird flu have difficulty in breathing, suffer diarrhoea, and muscle aches. He said those who consume poultry products must cook them thoroughly before eating them since the virus can't live in great heat.

Reported by Andrew Bagala, Henry Lubulwa & Martin E Ssekweyama