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Ongoing biosecurity needed for bird flu

By Mandy Archer

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4-H and FFA member Declan Tschirren shows off personal protective equipment included in a kit given out for free by the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health.

Photo courtesy CS-CASH

Ellen Duysen said she would never discourage anyone interested in starting a flock of backyard chicken. In fact, she recently added 25 baby chicks to her own.

Duysen loves raising backyard chickens, but she's also deeply committed to biosecurity, taking careful steps to shield her flock from contact with wild birds and putting in place other precautions that are easy to implement.

Protecting her flock's and her folks' health is a top priority.

Duysen works at the University of Nebraska Medical Center's College of Public Health and serves as the outreach coordinator for the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health. With her background in public health, she understands the importance of preventing illness within her flock, and more critically, stopping potential transmission beyond it.

"Obviously, in public health, that's our biggest concern," Duysen said. "If my birds died, that's tragic to me personally. But if I become infected, and the virus mutates and I pass that virus on, that's when we're in trouble."

While the current risk of bird flu transmission to humans remains low, Duysen emphasizes that taking precautions to protect lungs and eyes from the dust and debris in your coop is always good practice while working around poultry.

For those new to raising chickens, Duysen recommends "chick days" events and basic poultry husbandry classes.

From the beginning, build your coop to be as wild bird-proof as possible. Use chicken wire with the smallest mesh size to limit contact with wild birds, which can carry diseases. If, like Duysen, you also enjoy feeding wild birds, be sure to do so well away from your chicken coop.

Biosecurity should extend to your own habits, too. Keep a designated pair of coop shoes stored in a bin and worn only around your flock. After mucking out or cleaning the coop in chore boots, use a foot bath outside the coop containing an effective disinfectant to kill off germs.

Proper disposal of dead birds is also essential. Duysen advises bagging.

“Don’t just toss a dead bird over the fence,” she warns. “Wildlife eating a diseased carcass is how a virus can mutate and spread to other animal populations.”

Duysen also partnered with Declan Tschirren, an eighth grader and active 4-H and FFA member, after learning about his project focused on biosecurity and preventing the spread of avian influenza. Together, they created an informational flyer titled “Avian Influenza/Bird Flu: PPE for Backyard Flocks” aimed at helping backyard poultry keepers implement safe practices.

The flyer outlines recommended personal protective equipment (PPE) and proper disposal procedures when dealing with a dead bird. It’s designed to be perfect for printing and posting at home or in a coop.

The poster also includes contact information for requesting free PPE kits available to those raising backyard flocks or FFA and 4-H classes. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, with over 900 kits distributed to date.

“We’ve got clear safety glasses, shaded glasses, some N95 respirators, boot covers, hand sanitizer if you can’t get to water, and a bunch of disposable gloves for handling a sick bird or disposing of a dead one,” Duysen explained.

Having raised chickens, Tschirren understands the importance of protecting both his birds and his own health. His advice for others is simple: “Do your research and stick to the basics, especially when introducing anything new to your flock,” such as bringing in new birds.

“Check everything, and know the signs of bird flu,” he said.

One of the earliest signs is nasal discharge, and another is a comb that appears faded, blue or purple instead of its usual red.

Duysen said it's all too common to hear of people cleaning out coops without proper protection. In fact, one of Tschirren’s own relatives contracted a fungal lung infection from doing just that.

“A mix of viruses, bacteria, molds and parasites can all be present in coops,” Duysen reports.

Lastly, it's important to wash eggs purchased from backyard producers. Removing any residual feces is essential to prevent potential illness.

Setting a strong example, especially for young people like Tschirren who enjoy working with chickens, helps instill safe habits early. Duysen notes that her grandchildren love collecting eggs, and they do so eagerly while wearing gloves and their designated colorful “Coop Crocs” that make the routine feel fun.

Ultimately, anyone entering the coop should be prepared and properly equipped, as they might be the first to notice signs of illness or discover a sick or dead bird.

To receive a free PPE kit designed to safeguard you and your flock, please email Ellen Duysen at ellen.duysen@unmc.edu. Listen to Duysen on the FarmSafe Podcast “Flock and Flu: Guidelines for Backyard Poultry” episode at tinyurl.com/5dsr7xxy.

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