

**Episode Title:** Flock & Flu: Guidelines for Backyard Poultry

**Topic:** Guidelines and PPE for Backyard Poultry Amongst the Rise of Avian Influenza (“Bird Flu”)

**Summary:** In this episode, we sit down with Ellen Duysen, research assistant professor at the UNMC College of Public Health and coordinator of the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health, to discuss the importance of raising backyard poultry and the growing threat of bird flu (avian influenza). Ellen shares key insights into how bird flu spreads, particularly in small-scale, backyard flocks, and the potential risks it poses to both poultry and human health. Listeners will learn essential biosecurity guidelines to protect their flocks, including steps to reduce exposure to wild birds and maintain clean living environments. The episode also covers the importance of monitoring flock health, recognizing early signs of illness, and what to do if bird flu is suspected. Whether you’re a seasoned poultry keeper or just starting, this episode provides invaluable advice to keep your birds safe and healthy.

**Expert:** Ellen Duysen, CS-CASH

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**Episode Quote:**

*“Taking some very simple prevention measures are going to keep us from putting these birds at risk and then our family at risk as well.”*

– Ellen Duysen, CS-CASH

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## Transcript

### 00:10 E Ritchie

Welcome to the *FarmSafe* Podcast brought to you by the Great Plains Center for Agricultural Health. In the blink of an eye, an injury can change your life and your farm forever. During each episode, we share first-hand stories and real-life tips for making safer and healthier decisions while on the farm.

### 00:32 E Ritchie

The current bird flu outbreak has significantly impacted poultry across the US, leading to millions of bird deaths or culls. Backyard poultry farming, a popular hobby for raising chickens, ducks, and other birds for personal use, faces a significant threat in the form of bird flu. This highly contagious viral disease can rapidly spread among birds, particularly in close proximity to wild birds, and free-range practices increase the risk for backyard flocks.

### 01:05 E Ritchie

As interest in backyard poultry continues to grow, so do concerns about health and safety—especially when it comes to viruses like bird flu. To better understand the risks and what backyard flock owners should be doing to protect their birds—and themselves—we spoke with Ellen Duysen, associate research professor and coordinator for the Central State Center for Agricultural Safety and Health.

### 01:31 E Duysen

My name is Ellen Dyson and I'm an associate research professor here at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in the College of Public Health. And I serve as the coordinator for the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health here in beautiful Omaha, Nebraska.

### 01:47 E Ritchie

Can you just talk a little bit about what backyard poultry is?

### 01:52 E Duysen

Yes, so when we talk about backyard flocks or hobby flocks, we're talking about individual folks owning birds that they are using primarily for their own egg production. They may share them with friends or they may actually sell them, but at a very low level. And

we separate that from the producers in that they wouldn't consider their flocks production flocks. They keep them probably in one or two coops, manage them by themselves, don't hire folks to manage them. And that would kind of qualify for the backyard designation for our flocks. When you think of it, you could probably divide it up by income as well. You know, you may get a small amount of income if you're selling to your family, friends, your folks at work, but not doing this as your main source of income.

#### 02:39 E Duysen

I want to introduce people to some terms because I think we're in our media, our news. We're hearing some different terms. I just want to get everybody aligned with what they're hearing. So, if you hear the word bird flu, we'll use today in our conversation if you don't mind. And it makes sense, right? This is an influenza or a virus that primarily lives in birds. You may hear "avian influenza" and that's, avian just means bird. So, it's the same thing. You may hear "highly pathogenic avian influenza." That just means that it's...it spreads very, very quickly, very rapidly. And then you may also hear it referred to as "H5N1". And that's just a subgroup or a sub strain of many, different types of influenza. That happens to be the one that is currently in our wild bird population, now in our domestic population. You may hear it's been found in our dairy populations and even some of our domestic animals. But they're all referring to the same virus.

#### 03:40 E Duysen

And so, this virus, it has been found in our wild bird population, has been around for a while. Migrating birds that come in are carriers of this. They may not die from it, but a lot of our domestic poultry is very, very sensitive to this particular virus. And as a matter of fact, here in the U.S., we've had about 168 million birds that have been affected and either died or had to be culled because of this virus. So, you can see the enormity of the problem. And then when from a public health perspective, we do care a lot about the birds.

#### 04:15 E Duysen

But we also care about humans, and we want to make sure that this virus doesn't become something that is making us sick. It has been found in about 70 humans. I think that that's probably pretty low number. Those were the humans that came in and got, you know, had some symptoms. And there has only been one death related to this virus in humans. So, it is a very low risk at this point.

#### 04:38 E Duysen

So why we really care about our backyard flocks is because they can become infected. A part of that 168 million birds were our backyard birds. And I know how much I-- we have a backyard flock-- how much I love my chickens. And so, if for no other reason, I don't want them affected and I certainly don't want to pass something on to my family and friends as well. Taking some very simple prevention measures are going to keep us from putting these birds at risk and then our family at risk as well. I have 25 chicks coming here in a few weeks. And so, I'm going to have to practice what I preach because as I integrate these babies into our flock as well, I want to make sure that they're protected. And these girls grow up to lay these beautiful eggs that I've come to appreciate so much.

#### 05:28 E Ritchie

So, you mentioned some of those prevention measures. What are those kind of essential guidelines to protect yourself and your flock from bird flu?

#### 05:39 E Duysen

So, some very easy things that we can do. One is really keeping, trying to keep the wild bird population away from our flocks. But anyone that's had flocks know that it's hard to keep these birds even out of our coops. But a couple good ways of doing that, especially during migration season, really, that's the highest risk is when we have these birds flying over or stopping. Keep your coop covered with something where they cannot get in there. And so, we use like a netting that we would throw over fruit trees. It's smaller than our netting that we have around the coop itself. We just throw that over the coop so that those birds can't get in. Because it seems like every time, I open up the door to let my chickens into their run, there's birds inside so they are finding ways to get in and I just need to find ways to keep them out. Another thing is not feeding the wild birds near your flock. We all, we love to feed birds, we love to keep them healthy through the winter, they're our wild birds.

#### 06:33 E Duysen

But we make sure that that is a ways, yanno, almost an acre away from where our other birds are. That way we aren't getting those birds coming in and sitting on our coop. And we know that transmission can be from feces. It can be, if these birds are sick, they may have nasal discharge as they fling their heads back and forth to get into then our birds' area. Keeping those wild birds out is a great first step to do that.

#### 06:59 E Duysen

And then I think we also have to think about biosecurity. Just like with large producers, we want to make sure that when we are going into that coop, we're not tracking something in. If you just very simply put a bucket or a Tupperware container that has a seal lid and keep some shoes that are just designated for that coop, or maybe some shoe covers that are designated for that coop in that bucket, along with a pair of safety glasses-- that's going to keep the dust out of your eyes if you're cleaning. I don't think you need to put all this stuff on if you're just going in to collect eggs. But if you have had a dead bird or you're going to be cleaning that coop, it's just good practice to protect your eyes because it's not just this virus we're worried about. We're also worried about the other dust and things, the molds and the other bacteria that could be in these feces.

#### 07:48 E Duysen

Making sure your eyes are protected, and then a good N95 mask while you're cleaning out. There again, if you haven't had sick birds and you aren't cleaning that coop and there's no dust in the air, you don't need to put all that on. But if you do have a sick bird and what a sick bird will look like is you might see, you know, the color of their head kind of changes, you know, where they may have had some bright red on their cheeks and in their combs, it gets dull colored. You may see some nasal discharge. They may just be lethargic. They're the ones sitting at the corner of the coop, not ready to run out when you open up that door in the mornings. Making sure that those birds immediately get taken away from the other flock. It may save the rest of your flock. Putting them in a bag and sealing that bag and making sure that that bag is put someplace that no other animal, you know, I know a lot of us, know, if we find a dead bird, sometimes it just goes over the fence. And let's not do that with birds that, or any animal that we may think is sick or even have a suspicion that is sick. Making sure that that animal is either incinerated or buried is really good practice.

#### 08:59 E Duysen

And also, never handling those birds without disposable gloves on. You do not want to be handling any bird, a dead bird or a sick bird, without protecting yourself from that. If you don't have disposable gloves and you're just using chore type gloves, make sure that those chore gloves are kept separate. Maybe put them out in the sun for a while or spray them with some bleach to make sure that you are not transmitting that virus the next time you handle a bird with those gloves.

#### 09:24 E Duysen

And so really just taking some very simple precautions as you enter and leave that coop are going to keep your birds safe. And it's cheap. And as a matter of fact, I would love to offer folks who are listening to the podcast a kit that they can get from us that will be a starter kit for their PPE and let them know, you know, just stick it in a bucket next to your coop and they can have that then to protect themselves as well.

#### 09:48 E Ritchie

Important question: If you use a disposable N95, should you dispose of it after a one-time use?

#### 09:55 E Duysen

If you are using it to either dispose of your birds, it is a one-time use. If you are in there and you're cleaning and when you take off that respirator, it is not too dirty-- you have not, you know, you don't have fecal matter on there-- you can put that back in a bag, a woven bag, make sure you don't put it where it's going to, where it's going to end up molding. One day, my husband used to keep his respirators in a coffee can, and I opened it up one early spring, opened up that coffee can and where, you know, that there was just mold covering that respirator because he'd not let that dry off. So, making sure that, if you are going to reuse your disposable respirators, you store them in a place where they are going to dry. And once you see that they are dirty, go ahead and throw them out. And that's the same with your filters on your half mask respirators as well.

#### 10:48 E Ritchie

I want to ask you where to find local health guidelines. Where do people look for that?

#### 10:54 E Duysen

That's a great question. On our website, we always keep information available. Another great source is the CDC website. They have a lot of information, not only for small flocks, but for production type flocks as well, and how to stay safe with some great posters and some things that people, if they are having other folks working for them, it gives them some great guidelines as well to keep the flocks safe, some really good biosecurity measures. So, finding some really trusted sources. You we know we need to have folks that have researched this and really understand this to get our information from.

#### 11:30 E Duysen

We have a lot of FFA and 4-H students that will be showing poultry this year, and a lot of our fairs are going to make sure that we they have lots of biosecurity in place so that the birds that you take to fair, if you're planning on bringing them back home, are kept safe. But I think if you are either an FFA or 4-H leader, or if you're listening to this and you are in FFA or 4-H, we would love to have you talking about this to your group. Just raising the awareness of this throughout agriculture is going to make a difference in keeping folks safe. And you know, it's biosecurity is always good for any type of livestock. Right now, we're just happen to be talking about poultry, but this could pertain to any other group. And if you would like kits for your whole group, if you would like to do some presentation and would like to get more materials and kits, you can find my information on the podcast website.

#### 12:29 E Ritchie

Bird flu can cause mass mortality in affected poultry and, in rare cases, pose a risk to human health due to potential mutations. Preventing bird flu in backyard poultry hinges on strict biosecurity measures, including limiting contact with wild birds, maintaining hygienic housing, and regular monitoring of flock health.

#### 13:00 E Ritchie

If you have backyard poultry, take one simple step to help protect yourself and your flock from bird flu – grab a bucket or container and place it near your coop. Keep an extra pair of designated shoes or shoe covers, safety glasses, and some gloves in the bucket to use when entering your coop. And remember to wear an N95 mask if cleaning your coop or handling a dead or sick bird.

#### 13:27 E Ritchie

For a summary of the key points Ellen discussed in this episode, you can find the link to an article she wrote on protecting yourself and your flock from bird flu, posted in the bird flu column in Farm Progress. If you would like additional information on bird flu, and free personal protective equipment kits, you can find Ellen's contact information under the resources for this episode.

#### 13:50 E Ritchie

Listen in on the *FarmSafe* podcast to join in on the conversation about keeping safe on the farm.

We want to hear from you. Share your stories about health and safety issues on the farm, about injuries that made you change the way you work, or about the ways you keep yourself and others safe on your farm. Also let us know if there's questions you have or topics that you want to hear about on the air. You can visit our website, [gpcah.org](http://gpcah.org), or email us.

Original music for the *FarmSafe* podcast was written and performed by Ben Schmidt.

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## Episode Resources

- **“Protect Yourself and Your Flock from Bird Flu,”** Ellen Duysen: <https://www.farmprogress.com/commentary/protect-yourself-and-your-flock-from-bird-flu>
- **Bird Flu Resources** (from Ellen to include): <https://www.unmc.edu/publichealth/cscash/resources/resources-avian-influenza.html>
- **GCAH Bird Flu Resources:** <https://gpcah.public-health.uiowa.edu/avian-influenza-information/>

For your free personal protective equipment kit designed to protect you and your flock from bird flu, contact Ellen Duysen at [ellen.duysen@unmc.edu](mailto:ellen.duysen@unmc.edu).

If you would like information on bird flu and free personal protective equipment kits for your 4H or FFA group, contact Ellen Duysen at [ellen.duysen@unmc.edu](mailto:ellen.duysen@unmc.edu).

## Photo

