



County of San Diego

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To: All Laboratories performing diagnostic testing for Influenza

From: Heriberto Lima Jr., PhD
Supervising Public Health Microbiologist
County of San Diego Public Health Laboratory

RE: Avian Influenza A (H5N1) Testing and Submission Guidelines

As of February 7, 2025, the California Department of Public Health has received reports of 38 confirmed and 1 probable case of influenza A(H5N1) infection. All but 2 confirmed cases have been among workers at dairy farms with infected cows. All infected dairy workers had mild illness with conjunctivitis as a prominent symptom. One case occurred in a child with mild respiratory symptoms and no known animal exposure. Nationally, 67 confirmed cases have been detected; there has been one associated death in the United States.

The risk to the public remains low. However, people with job-related or recreational close and prolonged exposures to infected birds, cows, or other animals are at higher risk of infection.

Patient Testing

When there is high concern for avian influenza A (H5N1) infection in a patient, submitting facilities should contact the County of San Diego (COSD) Epidemiology Unit.

[To contact the Epidemiology Unit in San Diego County, you can call \(619\) 692-8499. For urgent matters on evenings, weekends, or holidays, dial \(858\) 565-5255](#)

Priority testing for H5N1 subtyping must be **pre-approved** by the Epidemiology Unit and meet at least one of the following criteria:

- Symptomatic individuals with occupational exposure (e.g. farm, veterinary, or wildlife rehabilitation work)
- Symptomatic persons exposed to a confirmed human case
- ICU patients or decedents who have had high risk exposures and/or influenza-like symptoms
- Symptomatic persons who have consumed raw dairy products and has compatible respiratory symptoms
- Symptomatic persons who maintain backyard birds or poultry
- Pediatric patients
- Patients with severe illness

Specimen Collection

Specimens should ideally be collected within 24–72 hours of symptom onset and no later than 10 days after symptom onset. Respiratory specimens for submission to SDPHL include

- Separate oropharyngeal (OP) and anterior nares swabs are preferred, although combining the samples in one viral transport medium is also acceptable.
- Nasopharyngeal (NP) swabs are acceptable; however, they have shown a lower yield of positive test results compared to oropharyngeal or anterior nares swabs.
- Upper and lower respiratory specimens including bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL), bronchial wash, sputum are also acceptable
- Collect a conjunctival swab from anyone with conjunctivitis, as it provides the highest detection yield. If both eyes are affected, each eye should be swabbed with a separate swab but both swabs should be placed in a single transport media tube.
- Conjunctival swabs **MUST** be paired with oropharyngeal and anterior nares swab specimens or a nasopharyngeal swab specimen, even if the person does not have respiratory symptoms.
- For details on conjunctival swab specimen collection, click on the following link: [CDC conjunctival swab specimen collection pdf.](#)
- SDPHL is not collecting stool specimens from symptomatic patients who have consumed raw dairy products or have gastrointestinal symptoms. (PHL has not verified stool specimens for H5N1 testing).

Specimen Swabs, Media, and Transport

- All specimen types should be collected using swabs with synthetic tips (e.g., polyester or Dacron®) and an aluminum or plastic shaft. Swabs with cotton tips and wooden shafts are **NOT acceptable**
- Specimens collected with swabs made of calcium alginate are **NOT acceptable**.

- Swabs should be placed in specimen collection vials containing 2–3ml of viral transport media (VTM) or universal transport media (UTM).
- Swabs in saline will **NOT BE TESTED**
- Specimens should be refrigerated for up to 72 hours after collection. Freeze specimens after 72 hours of collection. All specimens should be transported to the SDPHL on cold packs in a cooler or insulated bag.

SPECIMEN SUBMISSION FOR CONFIRMATION AND SUBTYPING: Please complete and submit the new [County of San Diego Influenza Test Requisition Form](#) for each specimen referred to our laboratory for confirmation and subtyping.

For H5N1 testing on specimens with previous unsubtypeable results, Epidemiology Unit should be contacted for testing assessment.

For any inquiries regarding influenza H5 testing, please contact Heriberto "Eddie" Lima at Heriberto.LimaJr@sdcounty.ca.gov or by phone at 619-246-0110, or Lyna Chheang at Lyna.Chheang@sdcounty.ca.gov or at 619-692-8500 for influenza surveillance.

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