

Dear pigeon industry members,

Since my last email, the laboratory has advised us that the pigeons they received for testing were negative for pigeon paramyxovirus. They were also negative for avian influenza, Newcastle disease and West Nile virus.

The most significant finding to date has been liver damage (hepatitis) possibly caused by a virus. We have subsequently been made aware of deaths in pigeons in other states including NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, some of which have similar signs. Western Australia also had an outbreak of hepatitis earlier in the year. Outbreaks appear to be associated with mixing of birds at sales or during racing, or people taking the virus home on their hands or clothing after handling apparently healthy birds. Mortalities are initially high in the loft but then taper off with some birds recovering quickly and others with lingering illness.

Our laboratory has sent samples for further testing to try and get an exact diagnosis but this could take a few days to a few weeks (depending on whether any of the tests come up positive or not).

It appears that the disease is highly infectious so we are advising pigeon owners to maintain and strengthen biosecurity practices. This includes:

- Keeping up to date with routine vaccination for infectious diseases
- Maintaining good loft hygiene
- Managing stress in birds to a low level including good diet
- Quarantining new birds for 2 weeks minimum, 4 weeks if you can manage it. Do not share equipment between quarantined and resident birds unless it has been washed and disinfected first. Handle quarantined birds after resident birds at feeding/cleaning time then change your clothes and shower straight afterwards.
- Be careful if you have to contact birds from other properties – shower and change clothes before contacting your own birds
- Carefully clean and disinfect any equipment contaminated by birds from outside your flock.

If birds get sick, please contact your vet for advice on supportive treatment which might include fluids, electrolytes and antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infection. It might also be advisable to keep birds inside the loft until birds are healthy so they don't infect other birds.

Kind regard, Emma

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Dr Walker:

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Virus identification procedures are continuing. As one can imagine I am receiving quite a few phone calls. At one stage yesterday I got 36 phone calls in 2 1/2 hours. I have answered some of the common questions below. This site will continue to be updated daily

Are recovered birds immune?

It is likely that recovered birds are immune for a period of time, probably months. We don't know exactly how long this time will be. Only testing will tell us. It really depends on what type of virus we are dealing with. For example, birds that have recovered from Pox virus are immune for life while we know from testing done during the initial PMV outbreak done in 2012 that in birds that have had PMV, after 12 months 10% are vulnerable to re infection. The number rises steadily with each month. This is why birds need annual PMV vaccinations.

Is it worthwhile treating birds with this virus with drugs such as antibiotics?

It has been suggested that it is worthwhile treating birds infected with this virus with drugs such as antibiotics. The idea is that by treating secondary infection that this may increase the number of birds that survive. We have autopsied and done microscopic work on many birds now. The virus causes massive liver damage. The birds die of liver failure due to this. We have not identified any birds that have died of secondary infections. Giving antibiotics does not alter the course of disease and there appears to be no advantage in giving them. Giving birds things like eucalyptus oil and "Pine O Clean" is in the realms of stupidity

What happens when the virus gets into a loft?

Typically nothing happens for a period of about 5 days. Some birds then start to vomit, develop green diarrhoea and a hunched posture. Sick birds die usually within 12 to 24 hours. All birds that become sick die. All birds in the loft become infected with the virus. Deaths continue for about 7 days. Between 15 and 45% of birds die. If you have unwell birds in your loft and are seeing a different pattern of disease then it is likely that you have another problem in your loft. Other viral diseases such as Circo, Adeno, PMV and Herpes as well as other diseases such as Chlamydia can look similar

Can the disease be treated?

There is no treatment for the virus. Many things however can appear to work. Any treatment given several days into an outbreak can appear to 'cure' the disease. In fact, the virus runs a natural course of about 7 days and deaths will stop naturally around this time

Are recovered birds cured?

No, all birds in the loft are infected. Birds that survive the outbreak may look completely normal but in fact are carrying the virus in their systems and can infect other pigeons. Long term testing will identify how long recovered birds act as carriers. This depends on the type of virus. For example we know that with PMV, birds act as carriers for 60 days, with Herpes it is lifelong and with Circo it is about 4 to 6 months. With this virus it appears that the carrier state ( and therefore the time that recovered birds are infectious to others ) is between 5 and 10 months

How long before we know what type of virus is causing the disease ie the virus is identified ?

The first cases in Victoria were 10 days ago. Initial autopsy and histopathology results were available in 4 days. Virus identification procedures started the same day ie 6 days ago. Virus identification results could be available as early as the next few days. It is unlikely that it will

be more than 4 weeks. Virus typing is absolutely critical. Once we can identify the virus then we can predict how it is likely to behave . In turn this enables us to make the correct decisions about its control

What is the plan to bring this disease under control?

PLAN and AIMS

1,Short term

Control of spread of virus—strict biosecurity, no inter-loft movement of bird or fanciers

2,Medium term

Completion of ID virus

Develop tentative immune protocol to offer fanciers some means of protecting their birds

ASAP

3,Long term

Long term trial to develop “best “ and proven method of protecting birds