

Cockfighting and Disease

Cockfighting is a criminal industry in the U.S. that impacts many states. Those who raise and sell roosters for fighting maintain hundreds, sometimes thousands, of birds - creating an ideal environment for the spread of disease. Birds are regularly sold and transported across state lines to fight in bloody cockfighting matches with no regulation or oversight. The fights themselves involve uniquely unsanitary practices such as cockfighters handling bloody, mutilated birds, and putting their mouths over injured roosters' beaks to suck fluids from their airways.

Also, many American cockfighters travel with their birds to countries where cockfighting is legal. Nations such as Thailand, where [people have died from avian flu](#) after their exposure to cockfighting, [routinely host American cockfighters](#) at large events. After being exposed to blood and bodily fluids from injured fighting birds, roosters and their handlers return to the U.S.—potentially bringing disease with them.

- The USDA's Inspector General [testified](#) to Congress that, **“Birds utilized in animal fighting competitions present a health risk to humans and animals because the birds may carry infectious diseases such as Exotic Newcastle Disease and AI.”**
- The National Chicken Council testified in support of the Federal Animal Fighting Prohibition Act calling cockfighting **“an inhumane practice that presents a continuing threat to the health of commercial flocks”**.

Avian Influenza

There is a clear connection between cockfighting and avian influenza, a disease the World Health Organization recognizes as a serious threat to human health. Although not as contagious as COVID-19, avian flu is of great concern because it has a [60%](#) mortality rate. In comparison, [coronavirus has a 3.3% mortality rate](#) in the U.S and 5.5% in China. As of August 2020, WHO reported [861 verified cases](#) of avian influenza in humans and 455 deaths. The threat of this disease has prompted the United States government to stockpile vaccines for a potential avian flu pandemic.

In Thailand and Vietnam , the WHO is aware of at least eight deaths from avian influenza caused by exposure to [cockfighting](#). One of the youngest victims was a six-year old girl who died after her family was given an infected fighting cock. The same year, the virus killed an 18-year-old Thai man who raised fighting cocks. Health officials said he had a habit of sucking

mucus and blood from the beaks of his injured roosters – a common practice among cockfighters, even in the U.S.

Although the [CDC](#) considers the risk to the general public from avian influenza viruses to be low they warn: **“Human infections with avian influenza viruses have occurred after close and prolonged contact with infected birds or the excretions/secretions of infected birds. Risk is dependent on exposure. People with close or prolonged unprotected contact with infected birds or contaminated environments are likely to be at greater risk of infection.”**



Highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5) has been [reported in 26 states](#) since 2014 and is also a risk to the poultry industry. In 2015, an avian flu outbreak caused the death of 50 million chickens and turkeys nationwide. According to a [report commissioned by the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation](#), Iowa lost \$1.2 billion, including \$427 million in lost wages, \$145 million in lost taxes and 8,444 jobs. South Carolina and North Carolina had outbreaks in 2020.

“It’s really astounding that we could lose half of our poultry flock in a couple of months,” said Dave Miller, the IFBF’s director of research and commodity services, **“Recovery from this outbreak, which devastated Iowa egg and poultry farms, will not be swift.”**

Virulent New Castle Disease

Although not a threat to human health, virulent New Castle Disease (vND) is also associated with cockfighting. According to the USDA, vND is a contagious, untreatable, and deadly viral respiratory infection of birds. Transmission occurs when healthy birds come in direct contact with bodily fluids of sick birds. It can also travel on equipment (such as gaffs) or people who have picked up the virus on their clothing, shoes, or hands.

In 2003, fighting birds illegally smuggled into California from Mexico are believed to have caused a devastating outbreak of vND. The resulting trade restrictions had enormous negative impacts on U.S. poultry and egg producers. From discovery to eradication, the vND outbreak in California lasted eleven months, led to the depopulation of 3.16 million birds, and cost taxpayers \$161 million.

Between May 2018 and May 2020, the USDA confirmed vND at 476 premises in California -- primarily in backyard exhibition chickens (a term often used to describe suspected fighting birds). As a result, over 1.2 million backyard and commercial birds have died or been euthanized. In 2019, the first cases of [vND in Arizona](#) and [Utah](#) were found in backyard “exhibition chickens” after birds travelled to and from California.