



# Holistic Pet Vet Clinic LLC

Quality Integrative Medicine with an Emphasis on Naturopathic Care

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## Bird Flu (H5N1) and Raw Food Diets

By Robert Ulbrich, VMD, CVH, CVSMT

There has been a great deal of concern over Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI, or “bird flu”) and the risks of pets contracting this from eating raw diets. In 2024 a cat in Washington County died of an unknown disease. Using a PCR test, H5N1 viral particles were detected in both the cat and in the opened bag of frozen Northwest Naturals cat food that had been used to feed the cat. This, along with the fact that the cat was an indoor-only cat, which would limit its exposure to other potential sources of bird flu, lead the Oregon Department of Agriculture to conclude that the cat died from eating meat contaminated with the bird flu virus.

It has since been learned that the cat “went everywhere with the owner” and was not indoors-only. So did the virus come from the raw food, or was it from the outdoors, perhaps from an ingested wild bird? And even if there were bird flu viral particles in the cat, did the cat die from bird flu, or merely with bird flu viral particles present in its body? Correlation is not causation. They used an extremely sensitive PCR test that has a lot of false positives, especially at the high number of cycles they used to find these viral particles. And the PCR test cannot detect if a virus is active or not. Additionally, they tested the food sample from an already opened bag of the raw diet, which could easily have been cross contaminated from another source (testing open bags is against the rules and regulations of the Oregon Department of Agriculture). They did not test *any* unopened bags. The batch they tested was an older one that was on the shelves in stores last August, and no other reports of sick animals have been made. Since the single batch of affected turkey identified by the Oregon Department of Agriculture was purchased and processed in May 2023, the facility that processes Northwest Naturals’ product has processed over 40 million pounds of product containing various types of protein, including over 1 million pounds of turkey, and not a single case of bird flu has been associated with any of these batches before or since this one presumed case.

Historically, documented cases of cats contracting bird flu have been rare, with most reports stemming from isolated events rather than widespread infections. Most if not all previous cases were found to have been from eating infected wild prey.

All poultry flocks are tested for the avian flu before harvesting and cannot be harvested if that test does not come back as negative. The High-Pressure Processing (HPP) process utilized by Northwest Naturals is known to eliminate major pathogens and viruses, including Avian Influenza. Consuming tiny amounts of inactivated virus would certainly not be expected to be a problem.

I believe the cause of this cat’s death was presumed to be from bird flu simply because that’s what they were looking for. No autopsies were done, either on this cat or on the large wildcats that were presumed to have died recently from bird flu. They found some viral particles which may or may not have had anything to do with any of these animals’ deaths, but that is certainly not proof. Again, correlation is not causation.

In the 30 years of recommending raw food diets to my patients, I have seen tremendous benefits from raw food diets. Two years ago, my wife and I adopted two young kittens from a farm in Banks. The first kitten was adopted at about 12 weeks of age and was immediately put on a raw food diet. The second kitten was supposed to go to a different home, but when that fell through, we adopted her 2 weeks later. The difference in the coat quality in those two kittens was like night and day, with the only difference being that the second kitten remained on processed food two weeks longer than the first. I feel confident that the benefits of minimally processed diets far outweigh the potential risks, and I for one will continue to feed my pets a raw diet.