

Study Recommends Keeping Cats Indoors in Bird Flu Areas

Felines in regions affected by the virus may be aiding in its spread, according to a report by a Netherlands medical center.

Researchers think that cats may play a role in the spread of the H5N1 avian flu virus among poultry flocks and could, in theory, transmit the virus to people who have close contact with sick felines, according to a report published this week.

We believe that the potential role of cats should be considered in official guidelines for controlling the spread of H5N1 virus infection, the researchers wrote in their commentary, which was published in the journal Nature.

Concern was voiced that the virus might acquire needed mutations to easily infect humans by first spreading among cats, and urged further study of the role cats might play in H5N1's transmission and evolution.

Scientists know so little about the virus in cats that its difficult to assess the risk they pose when infected, wrote virologist Albert Osterhaus and colleagues at the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, along with Peter Roeder of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

They also urged officials to be on the lookout for sick or dead cats, since dying felines may serve as early warning of the arrival of the virus, they wrote.

The deadly bird flu strain surfaced in Asia in 2003, and recently spread to Europe, Africa and the Middle East, but has yet to make an impact on the United States.

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