

## Bird Flu in Cats Should Be Monitored

**UN health organization says there's no evidence suggesting cats transmit the virus.**

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Cats can become infected with the highly lethal H5N1 avian influenza virus, but at present there's no scientific evidence to suggest that there has been sustained transmission of the virus in cats or from cats to humans, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations says.

In a statement released Feb. 8, 2007, the FAO said that as a precautionary measure, it recommends that in areas where the H5N1 bird flu virus has been found in poultry or wild birds, cats should be separated from infected birds until the danger has passed.

The agency also advised against killing cats as a virus control option because there is nothing to suggest that cats transmit the virus in a sustained way. Removing cats could lead to a surge in rodents, such as rats, which are an agricultural pest and often transmit diseases to humans.

Cats can become infected by eating sick domestic or wild birds; they can develop a severe to fatal form of the disease and excrete the virus from the respiratory and digestive tracts.

"This raises some concern not only because cats could act as intermediary hosts in the spread of the H5N1 virus between species but also because growth in cats might help the H5N1 virus to adapt into a more highly infectious strain that could spark an influenza pandemic," FAO Assistant Director-General Alexander Müller said.

The FAO says it will start field studies to investigate cats' roles in disease transmission in areas within Indonesia where the H5N1 bird flu virus is prevalent and where cats have died. This research will be later extended to other countries.