

Researchers Link Sick Cheetahs to Feces

Study suggests cheetahs ingest disease-causing pathogen during grooming.

By Soraya Gutierrez

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A cheetah's own feces might be to blame for a deadly, Alzheimer's-like disease. A cheetah's own feces might be to blame for a deadly, Alzheimer's-like disease that adds to the challenge of breeding the captive cats and saving them from extinction, according to a new study. The findings could uncover new ways to slow the spread of the disease, called AA amyloidosis, among cheetahs.

The sickness is related to "mad cow" disease and leads to organ failure. It tends to hit younger cheetahs raised in more crowded conditions, suggesting that it spreads from animal to animal.

A research team led by Keiichi Higuchi at Shinshu University, Japan, reports in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA that the disease was transmitted to mice exposed to fecal proteins from a cheetah that died of the disease. While the findings don't prove that a cheetah's feces causes the disease, researchers say it's likely that the disease spreads when cheetahs ingest feces during grooming or by eating contaminated food.

Patricia Tricorache, the Cheetah Conservation Fund's assistant director for international programs, says that any research on the health of cheetahs is important because they are so fragile. Higuchi's study could lead to more research that could benefit cheetahs in captivity and in the wild, she says.

The Fund estimates that 12,000 to 15,000 cheetahs remain in about 25 countries, down from 100,000 in 44 countries in 1900. Cheetahs are more likely to get sick from just about any disease that cats can contract, Tricorache says. A lack of genetic diversity due to inbreeding makes them more prone to disease.

Efforts are being made to help breed the captive cheetah population. Recent advances have been made regarding artificial insemination, Tricorache says.

"Everybody wants to keep them alive," Tricorache says. "They could disappear in 20 years if we don't do anything."