

Coronavirus

Transmission probed

Experts study 'virus' outbreaks in minks

MADRID, Aug 3, (Agencies): Coronavirus outbreaks at mink farms in Spain and The Netherlands have scientists digging into how the animals got infected and if they can spread it to people.

In the meantime, authorities have killed more than 1 million minks at breeding farms in both countries as a precaution.

The virus that first infected people in China late last year came from an animal source, probably bats, and later spread from person to person, as other coronaviruses had done in the past. Some animals, including cats, tigers and dogs, have picked up the new coronavirus from people, but there hasn't been a documented case of animals spreading it back to humans.

The outbreaks among the minks on the farms in the Netherlands and Spain likely started with infected workers, although officials aren't certain. But it also is "plausible" that some workers later caught the virus back from the minks, the Dutch government and a researcher said, and scientists are exploring whether that was the case and how much of a threat such a spread might be.

The outbreak at the Spanish mink farm near La Puebla de Valverde, a village of 500 people, was discovered after seven of the 14 employees, including the owner, tested positive in late May, said Joaquín Olona, regional chief of agriculture and environment. Two other employees got infected even after the operation was shut down.

More than 92,000 minks were ordered killed at the farm in the Aragon region of northeastern Spain, with nine out of 10 animals estimated to have contracted the virus.

After the Dutch outbreaks began in April, professor Wim van der Poel, a veterinarian who studies viruses at Wageningen University and Research, determined that the virus strain in the animals was similar to the one circulating among humans.



Ostfeld

Richard Ostfeld, a researcher at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook, New York, said that if confirmed, these would be the first known instances of animal-to-human transmission.

"With the evidence for farmed mink-to-human transmission, we definitely need to be concerned with the potential for domesticated animals that are infected to pass on their infection to us," Ostfeld said by email.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says some coronaviruses that infect animals can be spread to humans and then spread between people, but it adds that this is rare.

Both the World Health Organization and the Paris-based World Organisation for Animal Health, are studying the transmission of the virus between animals and people. Several universities and research institutes also are examining the issue.

The WHO has noted that the transmission on the mink breeding farms could have happened both ways. But WHO's Dr Maria Van Kerkhove said at a news conference last month that such transmission was "very limited".

"This gives us some clues about which animals may be susceptible to infection and this will help us as we learn more about the potential animal reservoir of (the virus)," she said, referring to cases in the Netherlands and Denmark, another major producer of mink fur.

While scientists think the virus originated in bats, it may have passed through another animal before infecting people. A WHO team is currently in China, planning to study the issue.

More than 1.1 million minks have been killed on 26 Dutch farms that recorded outbreaks, according to the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority. The government announced Thursday that minks at a 27th farm also were infected and would be killed. The Netherlands, which has some 160 mink farms, is the world's fourth-biggest producer of the prized fur after Denmark, China and Poland, according to Wim Verhagen, director of the Dutch federation of fur farmers. Spain has 38 active mink breeding operations, most of them in northwestern Galicia.

Both Spain and the Netherlands have tightened hygiene protocols at mink farms and banned transportation of the animals and visits to the buildings where they are kept.

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In this Monday, July 27, 2020 file photo, a nurse prepares a shot as a study of a possible COVID-19 vaccine, developed by the National Institutes of Health and Moderna Inc, gets underway in Binghamton, NY. Who gets to be first in line for a COVID-19 vaccine? (AP)

Coronavirus

Debate begins on how to ration initial doses

Who's first in line for COVID-19 shot?

By Lauran Neergaard

Who gets to be first in line for a COVID-19 vaccine? US health authorities hope by late next month to have some draft guidance on how to ration initial doses, but it's a vexing decision.

"Not everybody's going to like the answer," Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, recently told one of the advisory groups the government asked to help decide. "There will be many people who feel that they should have been at the top of the list."

Traditionally, first in line for a scarce vaccine are health workers and the people most vulnerable to the targeted infection.

But Collins tossed new ideas into the mix: Consider geography and give priority to people where an outbreak is hitting hardest.

And don't forget volunteers in the final stage of vaccine testing who get dummy shots, the comparison group needed to tell if the real shots truly work.

"We owe them ... some special priority," Collins said.

Huge studies this summer aim to prove which of several experimental COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Moderna Inc. and Pfizer Inc. began tests last week that eventually will include 30,000 volunteers each; in the next few months, equally large calls for volunteers will go out to test shots made by AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and Novavax. And some vaccines made in China are in smaller late-stage studies in other countries.

For all the promises of the US stockpiling millions of doses, the hard truth: Even if a vaccine is declared safe and effective by year's end, there won't be enough for everyone who wants it right away — especially as most potential vaccines require two doses.

It's a global dilemma. The World Health Organization is grappling with the same who-gets-first question as it tries to ensure vaccines are fairly distributed to poor countries — decisions made even harder as wealthy nations corner the market for the first doses.

In the U.S., the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, a group established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is supposed

to recommend who to vaccinate and when — advice that the government almost always follows.

But a COVID-19 vaccine decision is so tricky that this time around, ethicists and vaccine experts from the National Academy of Medicine, chartered by Congress to advise the government, are being asked to weigh in, too.

Setting priorities will require "creative, moral common sense," said Bill Foege, who devised the vaccination strategy that led to global eradication of smallpox. Foege is co-leading the academy's deliberations, calling it "both this opportunity and this burden."

With vaccine misinformation abounding and fears that politics might intrude, CDC Director Robert Redfield said the public must see vaccine allocation as "equitable, fair and transparent."

How to decide? The CDC's opening suggestion: First vaccinate 12 million of the most critical health, national security and other essential workers. Next would be 110 million people at high risk from the coronavirus — those over 65 who live in long-term care facilities, or those of any age who are in poor health — or who also are deemed essential workers. The general population would come later.

Critical

CDC's vaccine advisers wanted to know who's really essential. "I wouldn't consider myself a critical health care worker," admitted Dr. Peter Szilagyi, a pediatrician at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Indeed, the risks for health workers today are far different than in the pandemic's early days. Now, health workers in COVID-19 treatment units often are the best protected; others may be more at risk, committee members noted.

Beyond the health and security fields, does "essential" mean poultry plant workers or schoolteachers? And what if the vaccine doesn't work as well among vulnerable populations as among younger, healthier people? It's a real worry, given that older people's immune systems don't rev up as well to flu vaccine.

With Black, Latino and Native American populations disproportionately hit by the coronavirus, failing to

address that diversity means "whatever comes out of our group will be looked at very suspiciously," said ACIP chairman Dr. Jose Romero, Arkansas' interim health secretary.

Consider the urban poor who live in crowded conditions, have less access to health care and can't work from home like more privileged Americans, added Dr. Sharon Frey of St. Louis University.

And it may be worth vaccinating entire families rather than trying to single out just one high-risk person in a household, said Dr. Henry Bernstein of Northwell Health.

Whoever gets to go first, a mass vaccination campaign while people are supposed to be keeping their distance is a tall order. During the 2009 swine flu pandemic, families waited in long lines in parking lots and at health departments when their turn came up, crowding that authorities know they must avoid this time around.

Operation Warp Speed, the Trump administration's effort to speed vaccine manufacturing and distribution, is working out how to rapidly transport the right number of doses to wherever vaccinations are set to occur.

Drive-through vaccinations, pop-up clinics and other innovative ideas are all on the table, said CDC's Dr. Nancy Messonnier.

As soon as a vaccine is declared effective, "we want to be able the next day, frankly, to start these programs," Messonnier said. "It's a long road."

Also:

LONDON: Pharma giants GlaxoSmithKline and Sanofi Pasteur have announced they will supply 100 million doses of an experimental COVID-19 vaccine to the United States as governments buy up supplies in hopes of securing a candidate that works.

The **United States** will pay up to \$2.1 billion "for development including clinical trials, manufacturing, scale-up and delivery" of the vaccine, the two companies based in Europe said in a statement. Sanofi will get the bulk of the funds.

The **US** government has a further option for the supply of an additional 500 million doses longer term as part of its Operation Warp Speed program. (AP)

Monday, bringing the nation's total number to 39,845, the health ministry and local authorities said.

Tokyo confirmed 258 new infections, topping 200 for the seventh straight day, which brought the total cases in the city of about 14 million people to 13,713.

Since the government fully lifted a nationwide state of emergency late May, the number of daily new cases in the country has been on an upward trend, with the hardest-hit Tokyo reporting a total of 6,466 cases in July alone.

The Tokyo metropolitan government maintains its COVID-19 alert level at the highest on a four-tier scale, which means the infections appear to be spreading.

The tallies exclude those who were linked to the virus-hit Diamond Princess cruise ship in February. (KUNA)

43 virus cases in China: China said coronavirus cases increased by 43 on the past 24 hours, according to local reports on Monday.

The total cases have now reached 84,428 as virus-related deaths remain unchanged at 4,634, Xinhua reported. China's president is Xi Jinping.

Meanwhile, an additional 10 people have been cured for a total of 79,013 so far.

Outside of the mainland, Hong Kong has 3,511 cases and 35 deaths, Macau (46 cases) and Taiwan (474 cases and seven deaths). (KUNA)



In this Sept 14, 2010 file photo, Connie Culp, the nation's first partial face transplant recipient, speaks with The Associated Press at the Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland. Culp, the recipient of the first partial face transplant in the US, has died at 57, almost a dozen years after the groundbreaking operation. (AP)



Xi

Mills

Health

'Transplant' recipient dies: Connie Culp, the recipient of the first partial face transplant in the US, has died at 57, almost a dozen years after the groundbreaking operation.

The Cleveland Clinic, where her surgery had been performed in 2008, said Saturday that Culp died Wednesday at the Ohio clinic of complications from an infection unrelated to her transplant.

Dr. Frank Papay, who is the chair of Cleveland Clinic's dermatology and plastic surgery institute and was part of Culp's surgical team, called her "an incredibly brave, vibrant woman and an inspiration to many."

"Her strength was evident in the fact that she had been the longest-living face transplant patient to date," Papay said in a statement. "She was a great pioneer and her decision to undergo a sometimes-daunting procedure is an enduring gift for all of humanity."

Culp's husband shot her in the face in 2004 in a failed murder-suicide attempt for which he was imprisoned for seven years. The blast destroyed her nose, shattered her cheeks and shut off most of her vision. Her features were so gnarled that children ran away from her and called her a monster. The Associated Press previously reported.

Culp underwent 30 operations to try to fix her face. Doctors took parts of her ribs to make cheekbones and fashioned an upper jaw from one of her leg bones. She had countless skin grafts from her thighs. Still, she was left unable to eat solid food, breathe on her own, or smell.

In December 2008, Dr. Maria Siemionow led a team of doctors in a 22-hour operation to replace 80% of Culp's face with bone, muscles, nerves, skin and blood vessels from a donor, Anna Kasper. It was the fourth face transplant in the world, though the others were not as extensive. (AP)

Vaccine bait to be dropped: Authorities in Maine are distributing oral rabies vaccines in bait form in the northeastern part of the state early this month.

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services said the vaccines will be distributed starting around Aug. 3 and the effort will last for several days. The baits will be distributed by the air and ground and target raccoons over a 2,650-square-mile area. Maine Governor is Janet Mills.

The baits are coated with fishmeal. It's impossible for humans or pets to get

rabies from contact with the baits, but state authorities are asking people to leave them alone anyway.

Forty animals have tested positive for rabies in 14 of Maine's 16 counties this

year. (AP)

589 virus cases in Japan: Japan reported 589 new cases of the coronavirus on



Health workers perform a rapid test on a man at a parking lot that has been converted into an extension of the Gat Andres Bonifacio Memorial Medical Center in Manila, Philippines on Aug 3. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is reimposing a moderate lockdown in the capital and outlying provinces after medical groups appealed for the move as coronavirus infections surge alarmingly. (AP)