

French scientists build virus from DNA

November 8 2006

French scientists have used DNA technology to reconstruct a virus that infected the primate precursors to humans millions of years ago.

The scientists, at the Gustave Roussy Institute in Villejuif, France, said they rebuilt the virus from traces that still exist within the human genome, The New York Times reported Wednesday.

Scientists estimate that human endogenous retroviruses make up about 8 percent of the human genome. They occur when retroviruses insert copies of their DNA into a host cell's genome.

"Our genome is filled with retroviruses," said Thierry Heidmann, an expert on human endogenous retroviruses at the institute. "It's a hard idea to understand, but they are part of our genome."

The scientists named the reconstructed virus "Phoenix," and said they plan to use it to investigate the role of human endogenous retroviruses in cancer.

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Citation: French scientists build virus from DNA (2006, November 8) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2006-11-french-scientists-virus-dna.html>

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