

Scientists debate bird flu studies at WHO

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Scientists met behind closed doors in Geneva Thursday to discuss whether controversial research on a mutant form of bird flu capable of being spread among humans can be made public.

The two-day gathering at the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) was called to discuss the studies on the [H5N1 virus](#) which [international scientists](#) halted on January 20, citing fears of devastation if it were to escape the laboratory.

The WHO is expected to report on any decision made at the meeting late Friday.

The 22 participants include the two teams of researchers and representatives of the scientific journals Science and Nature who were asked to withhold publication.

"Participants will discuss the specific circumstances and results of the two studies and will try to reach a consensus about practical actions to resolve the most urgent issues, particularly those related to access to and dissemination of the results of these research studies," the WHO said.

Avian influenza H5N1 is primarily transmitted between birds and very rarely to humans.

Two separate teams of researchers, one in the Netherlands and the other in the United States, found ways late last year to engineer the virus so that it could be transmitted among mammals.

The breakthrough raised alarm that the method could fall into the wrong hands and unleash a massive [flu pandemic](#) that could cost millions of lives.

In November the US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) urged that key details remain unpublished.

Flu researchers agreed in January to halt their studies for 60 days in order to allow for international debate on the matter.

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