

A new case in China adds unknowns to bird flu (Update)

April 15 2013



A family watches a worker spray disinfectant in Naidong village, where a boy tested positive for the H7N9 virus, in Beijing Monday, April 15, 2013. The new case of bird flu in China's capital, a 4-year-old boy who displayed no symptoms, is adding to the unknowns about the latest outbreak that has caused 63 confirmed cases and 14 deaths, health officials said Monday. (AP Photo)

A new case of bird flu in China's capital, a 4-year-old boy who displayed no symptoms, is adding to the unknowns about the latest outbreak that

has caused 63 confirmed cases and 14 deaths, health officials said Monday.

The boy, who tested positive for the H7N9 virus, is considered a carrier of the strain and has been placed under observation to see if he develops symptoms, health authorities said. Medical teams found the boy in a check of people who had contact with a 7-year-old girl, who was confirmed as Beijing's first case of H7N9 over the weekend: a neighbor of the boy bought chicken from the girl's family.

Beijing Health Bureau deputy director Zhong Dongpo said that, as puzzling as the case is, the boy adds another data point to medical experts limited understanding of H7N9.

"This is very meaningful because it shows that the disease caused by this virus has a wide scope. It's not only limited to critical symptoms. There can also be slight cases, and even those who don't feel any abnormality at all. So we need to understand this disease in a rational and scientific way," Zhong said at a news briefing.

The H7N9 strain was not previously known to infect humans before cases turned up in China this winter, and Zhong and other medical experts said no evidence exists that the virus can be passed from one person to another. Close contact with infected birds is a likely source of transmission. Making the virus hard to detect is that infected poultry display slight or no symptoms, unlike the H5N1 strain which kills birds and raged across the region in the middle of the last decade.

The appearance of cases with mild or no symptoms in humans could make tracing even more difficult, but may also mean that many people infected do not get seriously ill and recover quickly, making the virus is less deadly than it appears.

Most of the cases have occurred in eastern China. In recent days, with hospitals and health officials on alert, cases have turned up in Beijing and the populous central province of Henan. The confirmed death toll from the virus ticked up by one Monday, a 77-year-old woman in Jiangsu, while three more cases were confirmed in eastern provinces, for a total of 63, according to reports from provincial health bureaus.

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Citation: A new case in China adds unknowns to bird flu (Update) (2013, April 15) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-04-case-china-unknowns-bird-flu.html>

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