

# Could your cat give you 'bird flu?'

November 15 2017

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(HealthDay)—U.S. scientists are reporting a case of a veterinarian who apparently caught "bird flu" from an infected cat at a New York City animal shelter.

The case occurred in December 2016. The unnamed veterinarian got through the battle with the H7N2 strain of influenza, but the cat died, according to researchers at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the past, people—often poultry workers—have contracted [avian influenza](#) H7N2 from close proximity to birds. However, "we know of no other reported instances of direct transmission from a cat to a human," according to a CDC team led by microbiologist and influenza researcher Dr. Atanaska Marinova-Petkova.

Extensive lab testing at CDC facilities showed that the genetic makeup of the H7N2 strains the cat and veterinarian had were 99.9 percent similar and "related to H7N2 viruses isolated from poultry in the United States," the researchers said.

More than 350 other people were tested for the flu virus, but none tested positive, according to the New York City Department of Health.

The case report suggests that H7N2 has undergone "many genetic changes" in both humans and cats, and points to a troubling "onward evolution of the virus since it was last detected in poultry and wild birds," the CDC researchers said.

But one specialist in infectious respiratory illnesses said it's not time for pet owners to push the panic button.

"Can you catch influenza from your cat? The answer is yes," said Dr. Alan Mensch, a pulmonologist at Northwell Health's Plainview and Syosset hospitals, in Long Island, N.Y. "However, it is extremely rare, this being the only case reported."

Still, the case means that "the CDC and medical experts must remain

vigilant," Mensch said. "It is within the realm of possibility that eventually a pathogenic form of [influenza](#), such as highly [pathogenic avian influenza](#), can affect one of our domestic animals and that [virus](#), in turn, can develop the ability to affect humans."

He also stressed that—as happened with the veterinarian—a bout of H7N2 would be unpleasant but not fatal.

And the precautions against pet-transmitted viruses are the same as those between humans. "One should avoid being exposed to secretions from a cat or dog who is demonstrating any form of illness and frequently wash your hands when your animal is ill," Mensch said.

Dr. Sunil Sood directs pediatrics at Southside Hospital in Bay Shore, N.Y. He agreed that caution—not panic—is warranted.

"This occurrence of transmission from a pet is very much the exception," Sood said. "It was an avian flu strain, one that is still very unlikely to infect humans."

The case report was published Nov. 16 in the CDC journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

**More information:** Alan Mensch, M.D., pulmonologist and senior vice president, medical affairs, Northwell Health's Plainview and Syosset Hospitals, Long Island, N.Y.; Sunil Sood, M.B.B.S., chairman, pediatrics, Southside Hospital, Bay Shore, N.Y.; Nov. 16, 2017, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*

Find out more about the avian flu at [Infectious Diseases Society of America](#).

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Citation: Could your cat give you 'bird flu?' (2017, November 15) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-cat-bird-flu.html>

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