

'There is a higher risk of zoonoses in the Netherlands than we think'

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Researchers of the Department of Psychology of Risk, Conflict and Safety of the University of Twente are sounding the alarm: They say the Dutch are insufficiently aware of the risk of new diseases developing

that are transmissible from animals to humans, called zoonoses. The coronavirus is such a zoonosis.

The behavioral scientists interviewed a large group of Dutch respondents about their perceptions of zoonoses and their behavior in response to these. Seventy percent said they would eat less meat if this clearly prevented the development of zoonoses.

"The focus of the current [coronavirus](#) crisis is on the extermination of the [virus](#). This makes sense, but at the same time there is little attention for the prevention of other zoonoses in the future," says Marielle Stel, Programme Director of the University's Psychology department and one of the researchers involved in this project. "Scientific research has revealed that there is a real threat of zoonoses developing in the Netherlands due to the way we keep [animals](#) here. Zoonoses occur where large numbers of animals are kept in close confinement, such as in intensive livestock farming; 75% of all bacteria and viruses that make people sick come from animals."

Raising awareness

More than 90% of the participants in the university's behavioral study were aware that a zoonotic virus could develop in the Dutch intensive livestock industry. However, a majority of this group did not consider this very likely.

"Many of them are not aware that the vast majority of the meat they consume comes from that same intensive livestock industry," says Stel. "Only 3.2% of all meat consumed in the Netherlands is organic, which means we lag behind most other countries in this respect. The majority of the participants (about 70%) indicated that they would consume less meat if this would indeed prevent zoonoses, and more than 70% also believe that wildlife markets and intensive livestock farming should be

banned. Most participants believe that they and the government share a joint responsibility for their behavior in order to prevent future zoonoses."

Virus mutations

According to Stel, it is important to raise awareness on this subject, because the risks are greater than many people think. "Given the high percentage of intensive [livestock](#) farming in the Netherlands, there is a real risk that a zoonosis could occur here as well. This must be given more attention. A new virus could easily emerge here, and this will happen more and more often if we continue to create the conditions for it. Ten years ago, [swine flu](#)—which is thought to have originated in the intensive pig farming industry—cost the lives of about 200,000 people. This could happen in the Netherlands too. Influenza in birds and pigs (bird flu and swine flu) is now only contagious to humans if there is intensive contact, but these flus could obviously easily mutate into forms that are much more contagious. Every year new mutations of influenzas are discovered that cause 250 to 2,000 deaths per year. We do not dwell on these incidents, but these were all mutations of influenzas that were caused by the way we keep animals.

Provided by University of Twente

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