

Russians infected with crossover flu virus suggests possibility of another pandemic

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Two virus researchers in China are recommending security measures after seven Russian farm workers became infected with a crossover flu virus last year. In their Perspectives piece published in the journal *Science*, Weifeng Shi and George Gao, both of whom are affiliated with multiple institutions in China, suggest that the makeup and history of the H5N8 strain of avian influenza virus threaten the possibility of another pandemic.

As Shi and Gao note, the new strain of influenza virus was first discovered in a duck in China back in 2010. By 2014, outbreaks had been seen in Japan and South Korea in both domestic and [wild birds](#).

And by 2016, it had been found in birds in India, Russia Mongolia, the U.S. and parts of Europe. By 2020, outbreaks had been seen in 46 countries. Shi and Gao note that this history indicates that the virus is able to spread very rapidly. Even more concerning was a report of crossover infections in seven Russian farm workers this past December. The authors note that the infected workers did not have any symptoms (they were tested for [safety reasons](#)) and there was no indication that the virus was transmissible from one person to the next. But they point out, that once a crossover has been made, it generally does not take a virus long to adapt to spread to other victims—they note how quickly the virus mutated to jump from duck to duck and then to other bird species. They also note that the virus has been found to be quite lethal, with massive die-offs in multiple outbreaks. The Russian workers were tested, for example, after 101,000 hens died.

On a more optimistic note, Shi and Gao note that it is not too late to take [preventive measures](#) that could prevent a pandemic. They suggest that vigilant surveillance of farms, live markets and wild birds, along with the implementation of standard infection control measures, could slow the spread of the [virus](#), giving pharmaceutical companies time to develop a vaccine for it.

More information: Emerging H5N8 avian influenza viruses, *Science* 21 May 2021: Vol. 372, Issue 6544, pp. 784-786. [DOI: 10.1126/science.abg6302](#) , science.sciencemag.org/content/372/6544/784

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