

Avian flu outbreak affecting feline world

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Albert Osterhaus and colleagues at the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, Netherlands, warn the role cats play in spreading bird flu is being ignored.

The first report of a domestic cat dying from avian flu occurred in Thailand in 2004 and since then an increasing number of feline cases have occurred. Those cases of bird flu have included the death or euthanasia of 147 captive tigers fed virus-infected chicken carcasses.

As an increasing number of feline fatalities are reported worldwide, Osterhaus, a professor of virology and chairman of the European Scientific Working Group on Influenza, and other scientists are proposing reconsideration of the role cats play in the spread and evolution of the avian influenza virus.

The researchers say cats become infected with the virus through contact with domestic and wild birds, and then excrete the virus from their respiratory and digestive tract, sometimes transmitting infection to other cats.

The scientists argue the impact of cats on the epidemiology of the avian influenza virus is still being overlooked by some scientists, along with groups such as the World Health Organization.

The commentary by Osterhaus and colleagues appears in this week's issue of the journal Nature.

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