

Group urges gov't to strictly limit chimp research

December 15 2011, By LAURAN NEERGAARD , AP Medical Writer



A group of chimpanzee play with a football at the Serengeti-Park in Germany 2011. Most US research on chimpanzees is unnecessary and should be strictly limited in the future, an independent panel of medical experts said Thursday, stopping short of urging an outright ban.

Chimpanzees should hardly ever be used for medical research, a prestigious scientific group told the government Thursday - advice that means days in the laboratory may be numbered for humans' closest relatives.

The Institute of Medicine stopped short of recommending the outright ban that animal rights activists had pushed. Instead, it urged strict limits that would make invasive experiments with chimps essentially a last resort, saying today's more advanced research tools mean the primates' use only rarely will be necessary enough to outweigh the moral costs.

Chimp research already was dwindling fast as scientists turned to less costly and ethically charged alternatives. The government agency in charge of it - the National Institutes of Health - called the new recommendations "scientifically well-founded" and signaled that it would make some changes.

"While operational details will need to be worked out, NIH intends to adopt the panel's general conclusions," said Dr. Francis Collins, the NIH's director.

These apes' [genetic similarity](#) to people has long caused a quandary. It's what has made them so valuable to scientists for nearly a century. They were vital in creating a vaccine for [hepatitis B](#), for example, and even were shot into space to make sure the trip wouldn't kill the astronauts next in line.

But that close relationship also has had animal rights groups arguing that using chimps for [biomedical research](#) is unethical, even cruel.

"We understand and feel compelled by the moral cost of using [chimpanzees](#) in research," said [bioethicist](#) Jeffrey Kahn of Johns Hopkins University, who chaired the Institute of Medicine panel. "We have established criteria that will set the bar quite high for justification of the use of chimpanzees."

For biomedical research - testing [new drugs](#) or giving the animal a disease - that means using chimps only if studies cannot be done on other animals or people themselves, and if foregoing the chimp studies would hinder progress against life-threatening or other debilitating diseases.

The panel advised the government to limit use of chimps in behavioral research as well, saying such studies must provide insights into the brain and behavior that otherwise are unattainable - and use techniques that

minimize any pain or distress.

The U.S. is one of only two countries known to still conduct medical research with chimpanzees; the other is Gabon, in Africa. The European Union essentially banned such research last year.

Here, too, the practice is dwindling fast. The Institute of Medicine's investigation found over the past 10 years, the NIH has paid for just 110 projects of any type that involved chimps. There are not quite 1,000 chimps available for medical research in the country. While it's impossible to say how many have been used in privately funded pharmaceutical research, the industry is shifting to higher-tech and less costly research methods. One drug company, GlaxoSmithKline, adopted an official policy ending its use of great apes, including chimpanzees, in research.

Thursday's report was triggered by an uproar over the fate of 186 semi-retired research [chimps](#) that the NIH, to save money, last year planned to move from a New Mexico facility to an active research lab in Texas.

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