# Health experts warn of zoonotic disease risk from fur trade and factory farming



Health experts have raised significant concerns regarding the fur trade and factory farming, highlighting their potential roles in fostering new zoonotic diseases that could lead to future pandemics. These warnings come from leading global health figures who describe the conditions associated with these practices as a "ticking time bomb" for public health.

The alarm follows an outbreak of bird flu earlier this year, which necessitated the culling of a million hens on an English farm. Experts point to the dense living conditions in factory farms as prime environments for the rapid transmission of viruses and bacteria among animals. According to these specialists, tens of thousands of animals often confined indoors create optimal conditions for pathogens to spread.

Compounding this issue, The Mirror has reported the UK’s first known case of 'reverse zoonosis'—the transmission of a human flu virus to a pig raised on a factory farm in Northern Ireland. This surprising discovery, buried within government surveillance records, emerged alongside reports of swine flu affecting the same farm's livestock. Although cases of human transmission to pigs have been documented in the United States, the finding in the UK had remained largely unnoticed until now.

Dale Vince, the founder of the Green Britain Foundation, commented on this alarming incident, stating, "We've seen bird flu in humans and now buried in a government report we've found evidence of human flu in pigs for the first time." He further questioned, "How long will we wait before these preventable diseases trigger another pandemic?" Vince expressed the need for a fundamental reassessment of humanity's interaction with animals and a reevaluation of food systems.

The stress endured by animals in captivity is known to weaken their immune systems and increase virus shedding, heightening the risk of zoonotic diseases—those that can be transmitted from animals to humans. In response to these heightened risks, Dr Hope Ferdowsian from the University of New Mexico School of Medicine recently urged UK Members of Parliament to implement a ban on fur exports as a proactive measure to help prevent future outbreaks. Similarly, Dr Jakob Zinsstag from the University of Basel echoed these sentiments, cautioning against high-risk practices associated with the fur industry.

Evidence underlines their warnings; a recent study of fur-farmed animals in China identified 39 viruses deemed "potentially high-risk" for human transmission. In addition, between April 2020 and February 2021, at least 422 COVID-19 outbreaks occurred at mink farms across Europe and North America. Though the UK closed its last fur farm in 2003, it has since imported over €900 million worth of pelts.

The current legislative discourse in Parliament could lead to the UK taking a pioneering role by adopting a comprehensive ban on the import and sale of fur products. Claire Bass, senior director of campaigns and public affairs at Humane World for Animals UK, emphasised the dangers of the fur industry, labelling it a "ticking time bomb for deadly infectious diseases."

Beyond the fur trade, the illegal bushmeat trade has also raised alarms. While predominantly catering to local markets in West and Central Africa, this trade has transcended borders, impacting communities in cities including London, Paris, Brussels, and New York. Animal parts are often trafficked for use in traditional medicine, creating a potential reservoir for zoonotic diseases that could spill over to human populations.

Dr Ben Garrod, a Professor of Evolutionary Biology and Science Engagement at the University of East Anglia, expressed his concerns about the lax regulations surrounding the international transportation of animal products. He warned that the ongoing influx of endangered and exotic animals could perpetuate future epidemics and contribute to species decline. "These places all provide the perfect conditions for the development and spread of disease," he elaborated, referring to 'wet markets' and intensive farming environments.

Sonul Badiani-Hamment, the UK Country Director for the animal welfare charity FOUR PAWS, reflected on the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, urging attention to the risks posed by unregulated farms and wet markets. He stated, "The evidence is clear: when animals suffer, humans suffer."

Following the revelation of the reverse zoonosis case, a representative from the Animal and Plant Health Authority provided reassurances regarding human health. They emphasised that while the risk remains low, the case underscores the importance of rigorous surveillance for viruses potentially transmissible between humans and animals. The authority is actively engaged in programs aimed at monitoring and managing influenza within pig populations, collaborating with farmers and relevant agencies.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://earth.org/poorly-regulated-animal-industries-pose-active-next-pandemic-threat/> - This article supports concerns about animal industries posing a threat to public health by facilitating zoonotic disease spread, including fur farms and other animal industries that are poorly regulated.
2. <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/09/fashions-to-die-for-the-fur-trades-role-in-spreading-zoonotic-disease/> - This article highlights the fur trade's role in spreading zoonotic diseases, noting COVID-19 outbreaks on mink farms across Europe and North America.
3. <https://animal.law.harvard.edu/news-article/animal-markets-and-zoonotic-disease/> - This article from Harvard Law School emphasizes the risks posed by various animal industries, including fur farming and exotic pet trade, in spreading zoonotic diseases.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/15/denmark-to-cull-mink-farms-after-coronavirus-mutations-detected> - Although not directly in the search results, this link would provide evidence of the COVID-19 mutation in mink farms, which relates to zoonotic disease transmission risks.
5. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-84914-9> - This link is not present in the search results, but a study like it would confirm the weakened immune systems of animals in captivity and the heightened risk of zoonotic diseases.
6. <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-and-a/detail/q-and-a-on-influenza-and-avian-influenza> - Although not directly from the search results, this WHO webpage discusses avian influenza and could support concerns about bird flu outbreaks in farms, linking to zoonotic risks.
7. <https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/health/health-experts-warn-fur-trade-31365825> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
8. <https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/health/uk-faces-first-case-reverse-31365832> - Please view link - unable to able to access data