

Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

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Subject Status of the research into COVID-19 at mink farms

Dear Chairman,

In our letter of 19 May 2020 we informed the House of the latest findings of the research into mink farms where SARS-CoV-2 is present and into a first likely case of animal-to-human transmission. Partly in light of the technical briefing we proposed to the House, which will be held on 25 May 2020, we would like to inform you about the most recent developments and findings.

A second case emerged very recently in which SARS-CoV-2 was most likely transmitted from mink to human at one of the infected mink farms. This case is similar to the previous one. In the most recent case the virus was detected in three individuals at the infected farm. The genetic code of this virus shows a close similarity to the virus found in the mink at the farm. On the basis of the information available, it is most likely that at least one of the three individuals was infected by mink. It is not possible to establish from the available data whether more than one of these individuals was infected by mink.

At this farm, too, the animal-to-human transmission is likely to have occurred before it emerged that the mink were infected. Personal protective equipment (PPE) was therefore not yet being used. The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) has indicated that the correct and consistent use of PPE in infected mink sheds prevents transmission. According to RIVM, the risk of the virus being transmitted from mink to human outside mink sheds remains negligible. The new research findings have not changed this assessment.

Genetic family tree of the virus

In our previous letter, we noted that researchers were mapping the genetic family tree of the virus in infected people in the area surrounding the mink farm where the first likely case of mink-to-human transmission occurred, to allow them to build as complete a picture as possible.

This has now been done. In this area no cases were found in which the genetic code of the virus matched that found at the infected mink farm. This supports the conclusion that it is likely that transmission from mink to human occurred.

A comparison of the virus found in infected people in the area was also carried out at the second mink farm where mink-to-human transmission is likely to have occurred. Here too, the three genetic codes of the virus found in the individuals at the farm do not match the genetic code of the virus found in other infected people in the area and in the rest of the Netherlands. This means that no strain of the

virus is known to be circulating among humans in the vicinity of the farm or elsewhere out of which these three genetic codes could have developed.

Farm cats and COVID-19

In our letter of 19 May 2020, we informed the House that three farm cats at an infected mink farm had tested positive in serological tests. Further tests were carried out at this farm. In total, seven of the 24 farm cats tested at this farm tested positive in serological tests, i.e. had developed antibodies against the virus. One of the cats that tested positive was also found to have the virus. However, the amount of virus is probably too small for its genetic code to be unravelled. The other six cats were not found to have the virus. This means that these six cats have had SARS-CoV-2 and are no longer carrying the virus. Because cats can contract the virus, infected mink farms have already been advised to ensure that cats cannot leave the site.

Screening and measures at mink farms

As announced in our letter of 19 May 2020, a start will be made this week on taking samples for the compulsory screening of all mink farms in the Netherlands. Screening has already begun at farms in the vicinity of infected locations. Pending the results of this screening, and in addition to the measures already in place at infected mink farms, preventive veterinary measures will be introduced this week at all mink farms in the Netherlands, including a ban on admitting visitors to mink sheds. These measures are currently being fleshed out in more detail; the House will be informed more fully later this week.

Veterinary epidemiological research at infected farms

Finally, at the end of this week findings will be announced in regard to the veterinary epidemiological research currently being carried out at the three locations of the first two infected mink farms. Based on these findings, veterinary experts will assess whether or not SARS-CoV-2 is likely to peter out at mink farms within a foreseeable period. Experts from the fields of human and veterinary health will subsequently be able to assess what risk the infected mink farms pose to public health. On the basis of the experts' advice the government will determine what measures are necessary to avert this risk. All conceivable measures will be considered. We will inform the House further about this as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

the minister of Health, Welfare and Sport,

the minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality,

Hugo de Jonge

Carola Schouten