

Ministry of Agriculture,
Nature and Food Quality

> P.O. Box 20401 2500 EK The Hague The Netherlands

De Voorzitter van de Tweede Kamer
der Staten-Generaal
Binnenhof 4
2513 AA DEN HAAG

Visit address

Bezuidenhoutseweg 73
2594 AC Den Haag
The Netherlands

Postal address

P.O. Box 20401
2500 EK Den Haag
The Netherlands

Organisation Code

00000001858272854000

T +31 (0)70 379 8911
F +31 (0)70 378 6100
www.rijksoverheid.nl/Inv

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Re The status of the research into COVID-19 on mink farms

Dear Chairman,

I am writing in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport to inform the House of the latest findings in the ongoing investigation at three mink farms where COVID-19 has been confirmed. The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) has discussed and assessed the latest results of this research with veterinary experts and the researchers involved. Together, they have come to the following conclusions: 1. it is likely that a staff member at one of the infected mink farms contracted SARS-CoV-2 from the mink (this staff member has now recovered); 2. the virus can run a subclinical (asymptomatic) course in mink; and 3. it is important to further examine the potential role of cats in transmitting the virus between mink farms. This means that additional measures are required, not least in the interests of public health. Below I will explain how I will adjust my policy accordingly.

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. RIVM made this risk assessment previously, after no samples of air and dust collected outside mink sheds were found to contain any trace of the virus. For more information please refer to my previous letter of 15 May 2020.

Given the above-mentioned conclusions, I have decided to designate SARS-CoV-2 infection in mink on mink farms as an infectious animal disease in accordance with section 15 of the Animal Health and Welfare Act. This designation allows more stringent measures to be taken in regard to mink farms.

I realise that these new research findings will have an impact on mink farms and on the surrounding community. I am therefore in close and frequent contact with the farms, sector organisations and local and regional authorities to ensure that they receive prompt and detailed information on the situation and that their questions are answered as accurately as possible.

Infected staff member and subclinical infections

Research has been conducted into the genetic code of SARS-CoV-2 in a large number of people and animals who have contracted COVID-19. This is comparable to DNA research in people. The virus that causes COVID-19 mutates relatively quickly. These changes to its genetic code can be tracked. By comparing the genetic codes of the virus isolates in different animals and people, scientists can create a 'family tree' for the virus and gain more insight into when and where people and animals were infected.

This type of tracking has been done in the case of infected mink and people. The virus found in one staff member on a mink farm showed similarities to that found in the mink on that farm. Based on this comparison and the position of the virus isolates in the family tree, the researchers concluded that it is likely that one staff member at an infected farm has been infected by mink. In order to clarify this finding, researchers are now continuing to map the genetic family tree of the virus in infected people in the area surrounding the mink farm in question. This will allow them to build as complete a picture as possible.

Until now it had been assumed that animals became infected through humans. The observation that a mink likely transmitted the virus to a person is new, but not unexpected. RIVM previously advised staff on infected mink farms to use personal protective equipment (PPE). The infected staff member worked with the mink on the farm before it emerged that the animals were infected and before the advice on PPE was issued.

As mentioned above, according to RIVM the risk of mink-to-human transmission outside mink sheds remains negligible. The new research findings have not changed this assessment.

Additional research has also shown that COVID-19 can run a subclinical course in mink. This means that the animals can be infected with SARS-CoV-2 without showing any symptoms. The current notification requirement applies only to farms where symptoms are observed (increased mortality and/or breathing problems). Subclinically infected farms could therefore remain under the radar, which is undesirable given the potential risks to human and animal health.

In response to the above-mentioned RIVM conclusions, I will take the following measures, effective as of 20 May 2020. As with all measures, public health interests are paramount.

- Mink at all farms in the Netherlands will be screened for antibodies. This screening will be compulsory. In order to assess the situation at mink farms in the vicinity of infected farms, the presence of SARS-CoV-2 is currently being investigated on a voluntary basis. Given the above-mentioned conclusions and in the interest of staff members' health, it is important to gain a clear picture of the situation at all mink farms. For this reason, screening will no longer take place on a voluntary basis but will be required by law. Screening will also be extended to all mink farms in the Netherlands, and will be coordinated by the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA).
- The course of infections on mink farms is being very closely monitored by various research groups to determine whether they eventually peter out

or continue to linger. This research is necessary in order to gain insight into whether the virus remains present on farms, something which needs to be avoided as much as possible.

- In the relevant ministerial order I will include more details about specific symptoms in mink that must be reported to the NVWA. The aim is to pinpoint at an earlier stage farms where mink display symptoms.
- The rules that already apply to infected farms will be extended to include special hygiene rules for visitors and a ban on admitting visitors to mink sheds. Visits to people's homes on the premises are still permitted.
- Staff at infected farms are still advised to follow the advice issued by RIVM and the municipal health service (GGD) and use PPE in the sheds. This will allow them to continue working on the farm with sufficient protection.
- Infected mink farms are advised to ensure that cats cannot enter or leave the site. Mink-farm owners are currently being consulted to determine how this advice can be implemented practically and effectively.

Farm cats and COVID-19

The ongoing research has revealed a close similarity between the virus strains found on two of the infected mink farms. There are several possible explanations for this. On one of the infected farms, antibodies to the virus were found in three out of 11 farm cats. It is therefore important to examine the potential role of farm cats in transmitting the virus. Farm cats are cats that live outdoors on a farm and are not socialised (used to human company).

Pending further research, mink farms are advised to ensure that cats cannot enter or leave the site. Mink-farm owners are currently being consulted to determine how this advice can be implemented practically and effectively.

Pets

According to RIVM, there is very little risk of a cat with COVID-19 infecting a human. In most cases, the virus is transmitted from human to human. RIVM's existing advice regarding COVID-19 and animals remains unchanged: keep pets indoors if anyone in your household has COVID-19-like symptoms and the animal may have been infected. If you are in any doubt or if your pet has severe symptoms, always contact your vet. RIVM's advice can be found in full at <https://www.rivm.nl/en/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/pets>.

It is also important to further examine the potential role of cats in transmitting the virus. The Netherlands Centre for One Health (an alliance between several research groups, including Utrecht University's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Wageningen Bioveterinary Research, Erasmus University Rotterdam and human healthcare research centres) is currently researching virus transmission in and by cats.

Decision-making structure

Given the developments described above, it has been decided to activate the Zoonoses Structure. Policymaking and decision-making in this regard are coordinated by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport in close cooperation with the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, RIVM, local authorities and municipal health services (GGDs). The Zoonoses Structure advises the health and

agriculture ministers. The two ministers take decisions in close mutual consultation, each based on their own policy responsibility. Public health is paramount in all cases.

Technical briefing

Given the complexity of these issues, I propose holding a technical briefing for the House in the near future, involving both human health and veterinary health experts.

Carola Schouten
Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality