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Bird flu study casts doubt on mortality rates

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HUNDREDS of people in Vietnam may have caught bird flu without becoming seriously ill, according to a medical survey which suggests the disease may be less deadly than it has appeared.

Around the world, there has been only a small number of recorded cases of humans catching the avian flu from birds, but about half of those infected have died - a frighteningly high mortality rate.

The fear is the disease will mutate into a highly infectious form among humans, which could kill millions of people worldwide.

But Swedish and Vietnamese scientists concluded that up to 750 people out of more than 45,000 surveyed in just one part of rural Vietnam may have contracted a mild form of the disease, which would dramatically reduce the mortality figures.

By July 2005, Vietnam had 87 confirmed cases and 38 fatalities, but analysis of the survey in the FilaBavi area led scientists to conclude that 650 to 750 people out of more than 8,100 who reported flu-like symptoms had contracted the deadly H5N1 strain of the disease.

One of the authors of the study, Dr Anna Thorson, of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, told The Scotsman: "Our study indicates that the highly pathogenic avian flu might transmit more easily to humans than we thought and that it might be a milder disease."

However, she said the results would need to be verified by blood tests, and added that people in Vietnam, where many families live closely with poultry, may have built up an immunity.

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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