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## Threat to human health as bird flu 'adapting to mammals'

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BIRD flu could be far more prevalent and humans more susceptible than previously thought, according to new research by British scientists.

A team at Oxford University, who studied a number of deaths in Vietnam, concluded that avian influenza, as it is formally known, is "progressively adapting to mammals".

In the case of a four-year-old Vietnamese boy, the child died from a bird flu-related disease despite not displaying breathing problems or other obvious symptoms, the Oxford University researchers said.

This finding has prompted fears that the spread and impact of avian influenza has been underestimated. The findings are published in the New England Journal of Medicine.

The study, led by Menno de Jong, an Oxford University virologist based at the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in Ho Chi Minh, found that the boy was heavily infected with the H5N1 avian flu virus. Samples taken after his death showed bird flu not only in his lungs but in his blood, nose, faeces and in the fluid surrounding his brain.

It was assumed by Mr de Jong that the boy's sister's death two weeks earlier was caused by a similar syndrome, but post-mortem samples were discarded and tests were unable to prove this.

Mr de Jong said: "In both siblings, the clinical diagnosis was acute encephalitis. Neither patient had respiratory symptoms at presentation. These cases suggest the spectrum of influenza H5N1 is wider than previously thought."

In 2004, 45 cases of avian influenza were reported in humans, 33 of which were fatal.

### 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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- [Bird flu](#)



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