

# 'Covid human-animal cross infection risks **very low**'

➤ Virus would need to mutate under specific conditions to create level that enables it to jump species, says virologist

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**PETALING JAYA:** Experts believe there is a very low risk of Covid-19 being transmitted from humans to animals and vice-versa, despite reports of several cases from around the world.

A virologist and a veterinary immunologist *theSun* spoke to agreed that such transmission is only possible through close contact.

Even then, as virologist Dr Sandy Loh pointed out, conditions must be right for the virus to mutate to a level that enables it to jump species.

“That would require a very high level of transmission in a good number of chronic cases in immuno-compromised (weakened immune system) bodies to enable such mutation.”

Loh, who is with the University of Nottingham Malaysia, said such infections occur mostly in pets or zoo animals under the care of infected individuals.

It was reported last week that two rare Sumatran tigers at the Jakarta Ragunan Zoo were recovering from Covid-19 after being given a prescription of antibiotics, antihistamines, anti-inflammatory drugs and multivitamins.

The report said the two felines were already on the road to recovery after 10 to 12 days of treatment, and are under close observation.

Loh said all available evidence suggests that the SARS-CoV-2 (a variant of severe acute respiratory syndrome or SARS virus) that causes Covid-19, has a zoonotic source, which means that it can spread between animals and humans.

She said most of the animals reportedly infected, including pet cats and dogs, had contact with infected people.

“We know that companion animals like cats and dogs, as well as big cats such as lions, tigers, pumas, cougars and snow leopards are vulnerable.

“So too are gorillas, minks and a few other mammals but we don’t yet know what other animals can get infected.”

She said while the risk of animals spreading the infection to humans is considered “very low”, she does not rule out the possibility that there may come a day when it does happen.

Loh added new variants could also emerge in animals. “For instance, the SARS virus can change in the mink biological system and is

known to have jumped to humans. The best way to stay safe, for both humans and animals, is to get vaccinated.”

She said Covid-19 vaccines for animals will be made available soon. In March, Russia announced it had registered what it claimed was the world’s first animal-specific Covid vaccine.

“Safari parks, zoos and animal shelters have already begun inoculating apes, lions and wolves to protect animals and workers.”

Universiti Putra Malaysia veterinary immunologist Dr Farina Mustaffa Kamal said that while research had shown that the virus could spread from people to animals, especially during close contact, more studies are needed to understand how it spreads among different animals.

Farina, whose current research focuses on Covid-19 in felines, said studies show that while felines can be infected by their masters, she has yet to see evidence of reverse transmission from animals to humans.

“At least, I don’t see it happening in the near future. There is no evidence to show that animals play a significant role in spreading the virus.

“It takes time for the virus to mutate and such mutation has to be very significant for it to jump from animals to humans. However, the risk of animals getting infected is low, so the chance of mutation is also low.”