

New virus discovered in bats that can infect humans like Covid-19

A group of Chinese scientists has just discovered a new strain of coronavirus in bats, capable of being transmitted from animals to humans through the ACE2 receptor - the same mechanism used by SARS-CoV-2.

The research was led by virologist Shi Zhengli, who has been dubbed the "bat man" for his outstanding contributions to the study of coronaviruses in this species.

The new virus, named HKU5-CoV-2, belongs to the HKU5 branch, which was first discovered in Japanese bats in Hong Kong. It belongs to the Merbecovirus group, which includes the virus that causes Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

According to a publication in the journal Cell a few days ago, scientists have isolated and identified this new variant as having the ability to bind to the ACE2 receptor not only in bats but also in humans and many other mammals.



An individual bat can carry the virus to humans. Photo: Nature

Experiments have shown that HKU5-CoV-2 can infect human cells as well as artificial tissues (simulating the respiratory and digestive systems). This raises concerns about the risk of transmission from bats to humans, either through direct transmission or through an intermediate host. In particular, the ability to associate with many other animal species increases the risk of widespread spread.

However, scientists stress that the risk of an outbreak from this virus remains low. Although the HKU5-CoV-2 virus is more adapted to the human ACE2 receptor than the previous variant, its infectious efficiency is still much lower than that of SARS-CoV-2.

The study also found that the Merbecovirus group currently includes four distinct viruses: MERS, two found in bats, and one found in hedgehogs. Of these, HKU5-CoV-2 is considered to have the ability to infect multiple species, but its ability to interact effectively with human cells remains limited.

Shi Zhengli, a renowned scientist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, has faced controversy over the origins of Covid-19. Some theories suggest that SARS-CoV-2 may have originated from a leak at a Wuhan laboratory, but Shi has dismissed the claim. While there is no consensus on the origin of Covid-19, many studies suggest that the virus may have originated in bats and spread to humans through an intermediate host.

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