

Chimps with SIV show AIDS-like symptoms

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Wild chimpanzees infected with Simian Immunodeficiency Viruses can contract AIDS-like symptoms and die, U.S. researchers said Wednesday.

SIV has many forms and was thought to be harmless to apes, researchers from the University of Illinois who participated in the global study said in a news release. SIV is the precursor virus for AIDS and HIV-1, which first entered human populations after transmission from chimpanzees.

"Chimpanzees and humans are very similar genetically, so perhaps we should not be surprised that these closely related viruses cause disease in both hosts," said Dr. Beatrice Hahn, a professor of medicine at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, who led an international consortium.

Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo and University of Illinois researchers established a chimpanzee health-monitoring program at Gombe National Park in Tanzania, providing laboratories and expertise for post-mortem analyses of chimpanzees that died during the course of the study.

For the last nine years, the consortium has monitored SIV infections of the Gombe chimpanzees. Researchers said they found chimpanzees infected with SIV were 10 to 16 times more likely to die in any year than those who remained uninfected.

"When I first looked at these samples I was taken aback," said U-I veterinary pathologist Karen Terio, a primary author on the paper. "Slides from one of the chimps showed extreme lymphatic tissue destruction, and looked just like a sample from a human patient who has died of AIDS."