



Surveillance for coronaviruses in wildlife – information sheet

What is the purpose of this study?

The Animal & Plant Health Agency is conducting surveillance for coronaviruses in UK wildlife. This includes SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19 in humans but which can also be spread to some animals. Broadly, the project aims to better understand transmission risks of coronaviruses amongst people, domestic animals and wildlife. It will support the development of diagnostic tests, aid future surveillance, and improve preparedness for future coronavirus outbreaks.

Our aim is to collect throat-nasal swabs and/or blood samples from wild mammals in the UK, which we will test for evidence of coronaviruses. All sampling is opportunistic (using samples that can easily be obtained in the context of other work or that have been collected for other purposes). We are therefore looking for volunteers (e.g. wildlife managers, deer stalkers) who would be able to collect samples while handling wildlife in the course of their existing work/activities.

The results will be compiled in a study summary report following completion of the project, and may also be published in peer reviewed publications and presented at relevant conferences.

The research has been funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and by the One Health European Joint Project entitled 'SARS-CoV-2 Research Integration and preparedness (COVRIN). The study is being conducted between March 2021 and March 2025.

What is involved?

The study is dependent on samples collected by volunteers (e.g. wildlife managers, deer stalkers) handling wildlife in the course of their existing work/activities. No animal should be handled for the sole purpose of our study. There are a number of mammal species that we are particularly interested to get samples from, such as cervids (deer), canids (e.g. foxes) and mustelids (e.g. American mink). We cannot accept samples taken from animals that have been hunted using dogs.

You will be asked to take a throat-nasal swab and/or a blood sample from deceased animals as part of your routine management activities. You must ensure that the animal is deceased before taking any samples. It is important to avoid contamination of samples by following the instructions in the collection kit that we provide. Do not take samples if you think that you might be Covid positive.

You will be provided with all necessary equipment, and you will be asked to record basic information about the animal such as species, sex, approximate age and location. Personal information and specific location will not be shared; geographical region of sampling may be used for reporting purposes. Prepaid, addressed envelopes are provided so that samples can be posted to the research team via any Royal Mail post box.

Why take part?

The samples you collect are vital to the success of this project. They will enable us to investigate the risks of coronavirus infections in wildlife in the UK, and allow us to improve our preparedness for future disease outbreaks. There is no obligation to take part in the surveillance work, there is no payment for providing samples, and you are free to cease participation at any time.

Risks

Wild animals can be infected with a range of diseases that can be passed on to people. Touching an infected animal or its droppings and then touching your face or contaminating food and drink are the most likely routes of infection. Disposable gloves (provided in collection kit) should be used when collecting samples, and you should refrain from touching your face with the gloved hand. SARS-CoV-2 virus has been reported in some wild species outside of the UK, in particular white tailed deer in the USA. However only one possible case of zoonotic infection back to a human has been reported, and therefore the risk to the person taking a sample is minimal. You should be mindful of government advice on measures to take to help mitigate risks associated with coronavirus, particularly social distancing and wearing face coverings when necessary. These protocols aim to minimise transmission risks, however you are in the best position to judge the particular risks and must take responsibility for your own safety, and that of others.

Contact us

If you would like more information, have any questions, or would like to request collection kits then please get in touch using the email address: wildlife@apha.gov.uk. We very much appreciate your participation in this important study.