

# Coronavirus Likely Came From Animal, Not Laboratory, WHO Says

## Preliminary assessment follows two-week visit by team of experts to Wuhan, China

#### The closed Huanan seafood market in Wuhan on Feb. 9, one of the first places where the new coronavirus emerged more than a year ago.

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WUHAN, China—The virus that causes Covid-19 most likely jumped from one animal to another before entering the human population and is highly unlikely to have leaked from a laboratory, a leader of a World Health Organization investigative team said at a news conference in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

In laying out the possibilities for [the origin of the pandemic](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/vlX_C4xYNJf6WEVcWLrkp), the WHO team said Tuesday it was also possible that it may have been transmitted to humans through frozen food, [a theory heavily promoted by Beijing](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/_arTC5y1OgsRK3JTxYGsx). But the team said the most likely scenario was one in which the virus spilled over naturally from an animal into humans, such as from a bat to a small mammal that then infected a person.

“Did we change dramatically the picture we had beforehand? I don’t think so,” said Peter Ben Embarek, a Danish food-safety expert who spoke on behalf of [the WHO delegation](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/km_fC68zPjtM97NILfkaa). “Did we improve our understanding? Did we add details to that picture? Absolutely.”

The preliminary assessment came during a news conference that followed [a two-week-long mission to Wuhan](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/oFcuC73WQkhy62gc0ZmYw), the original center of the pandemic, which included 17 Chinese and 17 WHO experts. It comes more than a year after the virus first began spreading in China and around the globe, killing more than two million people.

After reviewing environmental samples from Wuhan’s Huanan Market, as well as thousands of biological samples and case files from more than 200 local hospitals, Chinese and WHO investigators said the market was one place where the virus began spreading rapidly, but they cautioned that it was impossible to say how the virus arrived there in the first place.

Several smaller outbreaks followed by early clusters in the Huanan market would have adhered to a “classical picture of an emerging outbreak,” said Dr. Ben Embarek. However, he didn’t rule out the possibility that the first outbreak could have occurred outside Wuhan, including in another Chinese province or in another country.

“The market probably was a setting where that kind of spread could have happened easily, but that’s not the whole story,” Dr. Ben Embarek said.

The preliminary findings aren’t likely to calm the political controversy around the investigation into the origins of the pandemic. [Both Beijing and Washington traded blame](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/SeIKC82BRlCQMWGuR8Y5p) throughout much of 2020 for the early spread of the virus.

WHO researchers, including Dr. Ben Embarek, had previously deemed the likelihood of [transmission to humans through frozen food](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/ILyWC9rLVmUxKA0FGJE3E) very low. Only a handful of potential incidences of transmission have been documented over the past year.

“It seems to be extremely rare, and that being the source of the infection seems to be extremely rare, and that’s happening in a world where you’re having half a million cases now every day,” Dr. Ben Embarek said in a Jan. 31 interview. “Transposing that onto last year in Wuhan when the virus is not widely circulating in the world and thinking that could be the introduction is not the most likely scenario.”

WHO researchers had also said they would be open to pursuing [the likelihood of a laboratory incident](https://protect-us.mimecast.com/s/YfpCC0RXJBH4WQxI95h7l). In its final days, the Trump administration claimed to have evidence, which it didn’t present to the public, that staff in one of the city’s major laboratories fell ill with Covid-19-like symptoms in the fall of 2019.

But on Tuesday, the WHO team said it was reassured by hearing of the high biosafety protocols adhered to in the city’s major labs, including the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The lab was also not working with any virus closely linked to the one that causes Covid-19, Dr. Ben Embarak said.

“It is very unlikely that anything could escape from such a place,” he said Tuesday. “Of course this is not impossible. It happens once in a while…these are extremely rare events.”

*—Qianwei Zhang contributed to this article.*