COVID-19 Vaccines Are Running Out of Monkeys to Test Them On

Scientists may have to change the way they conduct COVID-19 studies, as the United States is facing a monkey shortage. Non-human primates are usually the last step before products go into human trials, but with over 100 new COVID-19 vaccines, therapies, and drugs in development, there aren't enough monkeys to go around.

> *The reasons for the shortage are threefold. First, COVID-19 has created extraordinary demand for monkeys. Second, this coincided with a massive drop in supply from China, which provided 60 percent of the nearly 35,000 monkeys imported to the U.S. last year and which shut off exports after COVID-19 hit. And third, these pandemic-related events are exacerbating preexisting monkey shortfalls. A 2018 National Institutes of Health report had found that NIH-funded national primate centers would be unable to meet future demand and specifically discussed a "strategic monkey reserve" to provide "surge capability for unpredictable disease outbreaks." A disease outbreak is upon us; the strategic monkey reserve was never created."*
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> *The Atlantic*

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Monkeys infected with COVID-19 are also required to be put in special labs, called Animal Biosafety Level 3 labs. There are a limited number of these labs in the United States.

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In an attempt to manage the monkey demand, the National

Institutes of Health (NIH) has formed a public-private initiative, Accelerating COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines (ACTIV), designed to control which products and which companies get to use the limited supply of testing monkeys. This initiative has the potential to save time and move scientists closer to vaccines, treatments, and therapies for COVID-19, but it could also make it difficult for those who aren't affiliated with the project to gain access to non-human primate trials. A quick look at the leadership organizations involved in ACTIV show names like Merck, Johnson & Johson, Sanofi, AstraZeneca, GlaxoSmithKline, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In light of that, the decision to control access to the final stages of animal testing feels less like an efficiency or safety measure, and more like a way for those who already have the power to keep it.