

How the AIDS epidemic came to be

The common narrative holds that the spread of HIV and AIDS among humans can be traced back to one flight attendant in the 1980s. But while that individual certainly did spread the virus, he was far from the first to do it.

In fact, humans had been infected with HIV as far back as at least the early 1900s, writes renowned science journalist David Quammen, who traced the genetic origins of the AIDS epidemic by reviewing scientific literature, consulting researchers and traveling to the geographic source of the deadly disease.

“The AIDS pandemic results from a single spillover of what was a chimpanzee virus, from one chimpanzee to one human, in the southeastern corner of Cameroon back around 1908, give or take a margin of error,” Quammen told The Post. But unless you’ve been paying close attention to developments in scientific literature, Quammen said, “that’s shockingly different than what we knew.”

Learning about the origins of a virus is more than just an interesting, historical exercise; it can provide insight as researchers work on therapies and potential cures, Quammen said.

“It’s bound to be helpful to understand how this virus works, how did it evolve and how it continues to evolve,” he said. “People have to understand that one of the things that makes AIDS a really difficult disease is the HIV virus is constantly evolving, constantly changing. ... So understanding its evolutionary history is part of understanding why it’s such a problematic virus.”

Read full, original story: [Tracing the long, convoluted history of the AIDS epidemic](#)