Philadelphia zoo rolls out plan to vaccinate gorillas, big cats and other animals at risk of contracting COVID

The Philadelphia Zoo is gearing up to vaccinate its highest-risk animals with an experimental vaccine developed by Zoetis, a former subsidiary of Pfizer that develops drugs for animals. While animals are not a major concern for spreading the virus to humans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, they may still get infected. Cases have been reported in some big cats and gorillas at zoos, household pets, and farmed minks, motivating zoos nationwide to help their animals build up immune defenses.

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“We can’t make a new vaccine for every species,” said Mahesh Kumar, senior vice president of global biologics at Zoetis. But the company thought its prototype, which seemed to be safe and effective in cats, dogs, and other species, might work for a wider menagerie.

Zoetis is donating more than 11,000 doses to more than 70 zoos and other animal organizations to be administered to everything from meerkats to orangutans. To maximize efficacy, Zoetis instructs zoos to administer two doses: the first to prime the immune system, then a second to boost the response weeks later, like human vaccines.

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