

# [***Timeline: How The Covid Lab Leak Origin Story Went From 'Conspiracy Theory' To Government Debate***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:67N5-7J51-DXVP-50GH-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Length:** 1461 words

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**Highlight:** The U.S. Energy Department reportedly became the second government agency to determine the virus originated in a lab.

**Body**

**Topline**

The U.S. Energy Departmentreportedly becamethe second government agency Sunday to conclude the coronavirus probably leaked from a lab rather than jumping from animals to humans naturally, a low confidence conclusion that lends more attention to a belief that was once considered and by some, still is to be little more than a fringe theory.

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This general view shows the Wuhan Institute of Virology in Wuhan in China's central Hubei province on February 3, 2021, as members of the World Health Organization (WHO) team investigating the origins of the COVID-19 coronavirus make a visit.

AFP via Getty Images

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**Timeline**

December 2019Aclusterof cases of a mysterious respiratory disease were reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the first traces of a virus that would kill millions of people worldwide in the worst pandemic in decades.

February 16, 2020Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) becomesone of the firsthigh-profile politicians to tout the theory that the coronavirus originated in a lab setting, either as an artificially created virus or as a natural virus that accidentally leaked out, an idea that broke with thepredominant theorythat the virus circulated in bats and was naturally transferred from animals to humans through a food market in Wuhan (Cotton acknowledged at the time he didn t have evidence the virus emerged from a lab).

March 7, 2020A group of scientists signan open lettercondemning the conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin ; this letter is later scrutinized, as one of its signers, Peter Daszak,is the headof EcoHealth Alliance, a group that has does work in China at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which some saw as a conflict of interest.

April 18, 2020Then-President Donald Trump, who frequently refers to Covid-19 as the China virus, says a lot of people are looking into the possibility of a lab leak, and says the theory seems to make sense ; Dr. Anthony Fauci, then the government s leading infectious disease expert,refutesTrump s claim, citing a study that found the virus mutations are consistent with a jump of a species from an animal to a human.

January 15, 2021In the final days of Trump s presidency, the State Department publishes afact sheetstating the U.S. government believes that some researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology a biolab whoseresearch into bat viruseshad drawn scrutiny became sick in fall 2019, shortly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic; in May, it isreportedthat three researchers were hospitalized before the first coronavirus case was reported.

February 9, 2021A team from the World Health Organization investigating the source of Covid-19saysit is unable to discern its origins, but calls the possibility that the virus escaped from a lab in Wuhan extremely unlikely though many observers questioned whether China gave the team enough access to reach a firm conclusion, and thenew Biden Administrationexpressed deep concerns about the report.

February 9, 2021A paper in the journalrevealsa close relative of SARS-CoV-2 the virus that causes Covid-19 was found in bats in Thailand, lending credibility to the theory that the virus evolved naturally and was not manipulated in a laboratory.

May 14, 2021A group of scientists publish anopen letterin the journal**Science**, saying we must take hypotheses about both natural and laboratory spillovers seriously until we have sufficient data, and arguing the lab leak possibility hasn t been thoroughly investigated.

May 26, 2021President Joe Bidenordersan intelligence review of the two predominant Covid-19 origin theories.

June 3, 2021Fauci, who up until this point has been steadfast that Covid-19 evolved through natural means,says the most likely origin is from an animal species to a human but I keep an absolutely open mind that there may be other origins, adding, it could have been a lab leak.

July 20, 2021Fauci and Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.)call each other liarsduring a Senate hearing, part of amonths-long debateover whether federal agencies fundedrisky gain-of-function research in China that modified viruses to study their evolutionary growth paths, suggesting (with no direct evidence) the coronavirus might have been created in a lab rather than merely leaking from one; Fauci denied the research method was used, and the National Institutes of Healthlater saidviruses studied with federal funding in China were genetically far distant from SARS-CoV-2.

August 25, 2021The intelligence review ordered by Bidendoes not determinewhether Covid-19 emerged from a lab or through natural origins.

October 29, 2021A declassified U.S. Intelligence Communityassessmentstates that two hypotheses are plausible: natural exposure to an infected animal and a laboratory-associated incident, but intelligence agencies remain divided on which hypothesis is correct; it also finds China most likely did not develop the virus as a biological weapon, and most analysts have determined with low confidence the virus wasn t genetically engineered.

July 26, 2022A pair of peer-reviewed studiespublishedin the journal**Science**determine the Huanan Market in Wuhan not a lab was the most likely origin of the virus, citing the virus likely genetic mutations and the presence of infected people and virus-positive samples near the market.

October 27, 2022Senate Republicansreleasea report saying the most likely origin of the coronavirus was a research-related incident at a lab in China, pointing to biosafety issues at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and a lack of critical corroborating evidence of a natural zoonotic spillover, and while the absence of evidence is not itself evidence, it is highly problematic a natural origin hasn t been proven three years into the pandemic.

February 26, 2023The**Wall Street Journal**and**New York Times**report the Department of Energy, which oversees networks of U.S. labs, has concluded with low confidence that Covid-19 originated in a laboratory.

**Big Number**

2. That s how many intelligence agencies, the Department of Energy and the FBI, have determined Covid-19 was leaked from a lab, according to the**Journal.**The FBI came to its conclusion in 2021 with moderate confidence. Four agencies have reportedly determined with low confidence the virus was transmitted naturally through animals. The CIA and one other unnamed agency remain undecided between the two origin theories.

**Key Background**

While there are many labs in Wuhan, where Covid-19 cases were first reported, the Wuhan Institute of Virology hasremainedat the center of the lab leak theory, as one of its labs conducts coronavirus research on live bats. The theory s adherentsusually believethe coronavirus either evolved in nature and was being studied at a lab in Wuhan before it accidentally leaked out, or was artificially created by researchers before it escaped though the latter theory has been heavily contested by many experts. The focus of the natural spread theory is the Huanan Market in Wuhan, where animals including bats and raccoons were sold, as many of the first reported cases were associated with this marketplace. ***Politics*** have heavily influenced the way these origin theories were initially received and investigated, as the lab leak possibility was touted by conservatives during the early days of the pandemic, often without any direct evidence. Many brushed Trump s claims of a lab leak offas misinformation, as he was frequently spreading false claims about the virus, including that researchers should study bleach injection as a form of fighting it. The lab leak theory has also been conflated with the idea that the virus was released on purpose as a biological weapon, an evidence-free conspiracy theory. The debate has been influenced by tense U.S.-China relations, with some of the lab leak theory s earliest backers including Cotton criticizing China for a lack of transparency.

**Tangent**

While China became known as the source of Covid-19, whether naturally occurring or in a lab, Asian Americans experienced anincreasein racism and race-targeted attacks that is generally linked to the pandemic. In 2022, the group Stop AAPI Hate reported there were nearly 11,500 reported hate incidents in the U.S. between March 19, 2020 and March 31, 2022.

**Further Reading**

Here s What Dr. Fauci Has Said About Covid s Origins And The Lab Leak Theory(Forbes)

A Timeline Of The COVID-19 Wuhan Lab Origin Theory(Forbes)

Covid Likely Originated From Lab Leak, Energy Department Reportedly Finds But Biden Aide Says There s No Definitive Answer (Forbes)

The Lab-Leak Hypothesis(New York Magazine)

EXPLAINER: The US investigation into COVID-19 origins(Associated Press)

Meet the scientist at the center of the covid lab leak controversy(MIT Technology Review)

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