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Turning a Virus into a Shield: How Newcastle Disease Strains Became the World's Poultry Vaccine

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There's something quietly remarkable about the way poultry farmers protect their flocks from Newcastle disease: they do it by deliberately infecting birds with a live, related version of the very virus they're trying to prevent. It sounds risky, but it's one of the oldest and most successful tricks in vaccinology find a mild strain of a dangerous virus, and let it teach the immune system what to fight without ever causing the disease itself. Newcastle disease virus (NDV) vaccines are a textbook case of this idea in action, and the story of how a handful of decades-old field strains became the backbone of global poultry health is still being rewritten today.

A Virus the Poultry World Can't Ignore

Newcastle disease is one of the most economically devastating diseases in poultry, capable of tearing through a flock with respiratory distress, nervous signs, and mortality that can approach 100% in unprotected birds during a severe outbreak. It affects everything from small backyard flocks to industrial broiler operations, and because it spreads efficiently through direct contact, contaminated equipment, and even wild bird populations, no poultry-producing region in the world is truly free of the risk. Given that there is no cure once a bird is infected, prevention through vaccination has been the single most important tool against the disease for the better part of a century. The World Organisation for Animal Health lists Newcastle disease among the small handful of poultry diseases requiring mandatory international reporting, precisely because of how quickly a single outbreak can escalate into a regional or even continental problem for trade and food security alike. That regulatory weight is part of why so much scientific effort, even decades after the first vaccines were developed, continues to be poured into refining exactly which strain of the virus goes into the needle, eye dropper, or drinking water trough.

Not All Newcastle Strains Are Villains

The virus responsible for Newcastle disease exists in a whole spectrum of forms, ranging from velogenic strains capable of killing a bird within days, to mesogenic strains that cause moderate illness, down to lentogenic strains that are so mild they barely register as disease at all. It's this last group the lentogenic strains that made vaccination against Newcastle disease possible in the first place. Rather than engineering a weakened virus from scratch, early researchers simply found naturally mild NDV strains already circulating in poultry populations and turned them directly into vaccines.

The two strains that still dominate global poultry vaccination today, LaSota and B1 (also called Hitchner B1), were both isolated from the field in the 1940s and 1950s. Alongside a third strain, VG/GA, they belong to genotype II of the virus and share more than 98% genetic similarity with one another. LaSota in particular has proven to be the workhorse of the group: it replicates aggressively and induces strong, reliable antibody responses, which is why it remains the most widely used live Newcastle vaccine strain worldwide, whether

delivered as a live vaccine via eye drop, drinking water, or spray, or inactivated and injected as a killed vaccine for longer-lasting immunity in layers and breeders.

The Cold Chain Problem and a Thermostable Fix

For all their success, LaSota and B1 share a significant practical weakness: they are thermolabile, meaning they lose potency quickly once exposed to heat. In commercial operations with reliable refrigeration, that's a manageable inconvenience. In rural and village poultry systems across much of Africa, South Asia, and Latin America where a functioning cold chain from vaccine manufacturer to backyard chicken coop is often simply unavailable it can mean the vaccine is already useless by the time it reaches the bird. This is where a different lentogenic strain, known as I-2, has carved out its own important niche. Along with a related strain called V4, I-2 is naturally thermostable, retaining its potency far longer than LaSota or B1 even at high ambient or room temperatures, in both freeze-dried and reconstituted form. That single property makes it dramatically more practical for smallholder and village poultry vaccination campaigns, where it can be administered by relatively untrained handlers via eye drop, drinking water, or even mixed into feed, without needing to worry about a broken refrigerator ruining an entire vaccination drive. Research comparing I-2 directly against B1 has found comparable protection against mortality and clinical disease, while offering the added resilience that tropical field conditions demand a reminder that in vaccine science, practicality can matter just as much as raw potency.

When the Field Virus Moves On, and the Vaccine Doesn't

Here's the twist in the story: the field strains of Newcastle disease virus haven't stood still since the 1940s, but the vaccine strains largely have. Genotype II viruses, the group LaSota, B1, and VG/GA all belong to, are now relatively rare in the wild. The virulent strains actually circulating and causing outbreaks in many parts of the world today genotype VII in large swaths of Asia and the Middle East, genotype XII in Chinese waterfowl populations, and other regionally dominant genotypes elsewhere are genetically quite distant from the vaccines still being used to protect against them. In practice, this mismatch doesn't mean the old vaccines have stopped working entirely. Vaccinated birds challenged with these newer, more virulent genotypes are still largely protected against death. But protection against infection and virus shedding is a different story: studies have repeatedly shown that vaccinated birds can still become infected with a mismatched field strain and continue shedding it into the environment, silently maintaining transmission chains even in a flock that looks perfectly healthy on the surface. That gap between 'the bird survives' and 'the bird doesn't spread the virus' has become one of the most persistent frustrations in Newcastle disease control, and it's driven a wave of new research aimed at closing it.

Rebuilding the Vaccine From the Ground Up

The modern answer to genotype mismatch is reverse genetics a laboratory technique that allows researchers to rebuild an entire virus from cloned genetic material, piece by piece, rather than relying on whatever mild strain nature happens to provide. Using this approach, scientists can take a genuinely circulating, virulent field strain, identify the small stretch of its fusion (F) protein responsible for making it dangerous, and surgically swap that single virulence marker for a harmless version instantly converting a dangerous field virus into a safe, lentogenic vaccine candidate that is a near-perfect antigenic match for the strains actually threatening local flocks. This isn't just a theoretical exercise. Research groups in China have used reverse genetics to build attenuated vaccine candidates directly from genotype VII field isolates, the dominant epidemic strain across the region, and shown that these genotype-matched vaccines reduce viral shedding and transmission more effectively than the older, mismatched LaSota-based vaccines. Similar work targeting genotype XII strains circulating in geese, and a naturally recombinant Malaysian isolate reworked into a genotype VII-matched vaccine, point to the same conclusion: a vaccine that antigenically resembles what's actually infecting local birds provides a meaningfully tighter shield than a

vaccine built on a 70-year-old mismatch, even when both technically 'work' by the traditional survival-rate measure.

One Shot, Multiple Diseases

Reverse genetics has opened up an even more ambitious possibility: using the Newcastle disease virus itself as a delivery vehicle for protection against entirely different diseases. Because the LaSota backbone is so well characterized, safe, and easy to manipulate, researchers have learned to insert genes from other poultry pathogens directly into it, creating a single vaccine that trains the immune system against several threats at once. Recombinant NDV-vectored vaccines have been built to simultaneously protect against Newcastle disease, infectious bursal disease, and H9N2 avian influenza three of the most economically damaging poultry diseases in the world all from one genotype-matched viral backbone and, ideally, a single dose.

For a commercial poultry operation, that kind of combination vaccine reduces handling stress on birds, cuts labor costs, and simplifies an already crowded vaccination schedule. For smallholder farmers in lower-resource settings, where every vaccination visit represents real time and expense, a single multivalent shot that covers several major threats at once could meaningfully improve how consistently vaccines actually reach the birds that need them.

The design logic behind these combination vaccines is elegant in its simplicity: the Newcastle disease backbone does double duty as both a protective antigen in its own right and as a genetic delivery truck for cargo genes from other pathogens. Because the modified virus still needs to replicate safely and induce immunity on its own terms, researchers have to carefully balance how much foreign genetic material they add without compromising the vaccine's core safety profile a balancing act that has taken years of incremental refinement to get right, but one that is increasingly paying off in trials combining protection against Newcastle disease, infectious bursal disease, and avian influenza in a single formulation.

The Trade-offs Still on the Table

- Genotype-matched and recombinant vaccines require far more sophisticated manufacturing and quality control than the decades-old master seed stocks of LaSota or B1, raising production costs.
- Regulatory approval for a new vaccine strain, especially a genetically engineered one, is a slower and more demanding process than continuing to produce an already-licensed classic strain.
- Field strains keep evolving, meaning any genotype-matched vaccine developed today may itself become outdated as new variants emerge, requiring an ongoing cycle of surveillance and redesign rather than a one-time fix.
- Thermostability, ease of administration, and cost-effectiveness the very qualities that made I-2 valuable still need to be preserved as vaccines get more genetically sophisticated, or the practical benefits could be lost even as the antigenic match improves.

From Field Isolate to Engineered Platform

The arc of the Newcastle disease vaccine story is, in miniature, the story of vaccinology itself: it started with a stroke of good fortune mild, naturally occurring strains that happened to protect against a lethal relative and has gradually evolved into a deliberately engineered science, where researchers can now design a vaccine strain to match whatever virus happens to be circulating in a given region this year. LaSota and B1 aren't going away anytime soon; they remain cheap, proven, and globally available. But the growing toolkit of thermostable strains, genotype-matched reverse-genetics vaccines, and multivalent recombinant platforms suggests that the next generation of Newcastle disease control will look less like a single universal vaccine and more like a constantly updated, tailored response to a virus that has never stopped changing.