

Pandemic Prevention Starts with Finding COVID-19's Root Cause

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › More than six years after the COVID-19 outbreak began, its origin remains unresolved, leaving an important question about which risks pandemic prevention efforts need to address
- › Bill Gurley argues that major catastrophes such as Challenger, Fukushima and the Boeing 737 MAX crashes received extensive root-cause investigations that offer a model for examining COVID-19's origins
- › The CAPA framework follows five steps — detect, investigate, confirm the root cause, correct and prevent — because effective safeguards depend on knowing what produced the original failure
- › The DEFUSE proposal described plans to insert a furin cleavage site into a bat coronavirus, a feature also found in SARS-CoV-2, making it an important investigative lead but not proof of a lab origin
- › You can apply root-cause thinking to health and everyday decisions by separating evidence from interpretation, checking original sources, considering conflicts of interest and directing solutions at the underlying cause

When a plane crashes or a building collapses, investigators are expected to find out why. They recover records, interview witnesses, examine physical evidence and reconstruct the chain of failures. The goal goes beyond assigning blame. Knowing what went wrong is the most reliable way to keep the same sequence from repeating.

COVID-19 deserves that same scrutiny. The pandemic disrupted lives around the world, closed schools and businesses, strained health systems and left lasting questions about how SARS-CoV-2 first reached humans. Yet more than six years after the outbreak began, its origin remains unresolved. Knowing how the last pandemic began is what tells you whether the safeguards built to prevent the next one target the right risks.

Investor Bill Gurley makes that problem the focus of a recent presentation that holds the search for COVID-19's origin up against the investigations that followed other major disasters. His argument works without accepting a lab origin or natural animal spillover in advance. He asks a more foundational question: Was COVID-19 subjected to the kind of independent, persistent root-cause investigation that follows other major catastrophes?

Scientific inquiry works when competing explanations face evidence rather than politics, institutional loyalties or assumptions. To understand what pandemic prevention still lacks, you first need to see how investigators found the causes of other disasters, and why Gurley argues the search for COVID-19's origin followed a very different path.

Root-Cause Investigations Reveal What Pandemic Prevention Is Missing

In a September 2026 presentation at the All-In Summit, Gurley compared the unresolved search for [COVID-19's origin](#) with investigations of major disasters.¹ His focus was the process used to uncover failure, especially when institutions responsible for safety also faced scrutiny.

- **Major disasters triggered multiple independent searches for answers** — Gurley examined the 2021 Surfside condominium collapse, the Boeing 737 MAX crashes, Hurricane Katrina, Fukushima and the Challenger disaster. In each example, multiple groups pursued the cause, from journalists and government investigators to scientists, whistleblowers and victims' families.

Gurley emphasized that these groups didn't always cooperate. Sometimes they collided or challenged one another. That independence was useful because it gave the public several paths to evidence rather than one institution's explanation.

- **Root-cause analysis follows a step-by-step process** — Gurley highlighted Corrective and Preventive Action (CAPA), a framework built around five steps: “detect, investigate, confirm root cause, correct, and prevent.” Prevention depends on first establishing what produced the failure. CAPA isn't an abstract idea.

Gurley noted that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration requires it in pharmaceutical and medical device manufacturing, where companies must investigate the cause of a quality problem and take action to correct it and keep it from recurring.

Think of it like fixing repeated water damage in your house. Replacing wet drywall addresses the damage, but it won't stop another leak. You first need to determine whether the source is a pipe, roof or foundation. Gurley applies the same logic to pandemic prevention: “You don't know how to fix it if you don't know actually what happened.”

- **Independent investigators exposed failures that institutions resisted** — Gurley repeatedly contrasts “searchers,” who pursue the cause, with “blockers,” institutions or people who resist scrutiny. After Challenger, physicist Richard Feynman conducted his own investigation rather than simply review information supplied to the presidential commission. He famously demonstrated the vulnerability of the shuttle's O-ring material to cold during a televised hearing.

Gurley sees an important lesson here: expertise alone isn't enough. Investigators also need independence and access to evidence. His examples show why records, firsthand testimony and competing analyses matter when the organization under investigation has an interest in defending its past decisions.

- **The DEFUSE proposal provides a specific lead investigators could test** — Gurley gives particular attention to [DEFUSE](#), a research proposal from EcoHealth Alliance that involved coronavirus researchers in the U.S. and China. According to Gurley, the proposal described plans involving insertion of a furin cleavage site at the S1-S2 junction of a bat coronavirus.

The proposal was submitted in 2018 to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which declined to fund it; whether any of the proposed work was carried out with other funding remains unknown.²

A furin cleavage site is a section of a virus's spike protein that certain enzymes cut, which affects how the virus enters cells. Gurley argues that DEFUSE warrants scrutiny because SARS-CoV-2 also has a furin cleavage site. Importantly, the existence of a proposal doesn't establish that the proposed experiment took place or that it produced SARS-CoV-2. Gurley presents it as an investigative lead that calls for primary records and further examination.

- **Gurley argues that early messaging narrowed the search too quickly** — He contends that influential virologists and scientific publications helped establish animal spillover as the favored explanation while [lab-origin questions](#) became associated with conspiracy theories. He describes this as a failure of scientific inquiry because investigators need freedom to test competing explanations.

Gurley points to later-released communications and the subsequent debate over early scientific papers as reasons to scrutinize how that consensus formed. His concern centers on the investigation itself: "There's no one that should be telling you you can't search."

- **Gurley refuses to declare either origin theory proven** — When directly asked which origin scenario he believed was most likely, Gurley answered, "I intentionally didn't take a side on that here," adding that the root cause had not been found. He even said he would support researchers who wanted to continue searching for evidence of animal spillover.

That distinction keeps an **open investigation** from becoming a predetermined verdict. For pandemic prevention, the useful question is which explanation survives a thorough examination of primary evidence, and what safeguards that evidence says to change before another outbreak occurs. The same discipline Gurley wants applied to COVID-19 works on a much smaller scale, too.

Use Root-Cause Thinking in Your Own Life

You can apply the principles Gurley describes to far more than the investigation into COVID-19's origins. Root-cause analysis is a useful way to approach health problems, conflicting information and even recurring problems in everyday life. Instead of reacting to the most visible symptom or accepting the first explanation you hear, slow the process down: identify what you know, find the original evidence, test other explanations and direct your response at the actual cause.

- 1. Ask what caused the problem before trying to fix it** — When something goes wrong, the first instinct is often to make the immediate problem disappear. Instead, ask what produced it. If the same problem keeps returning, that's an especially strong reason to look deeper. You can apply this to your health as well as everyday life.

If you repeatedly feel **exhausted**, for example, simply finding ways to push through the fatigue addresses the symptom rather than explaining why it keeps occurring. Start with the question, "What changed, and what could be driving this?" Keep a simple log of sleep, meals, stress and energy for two weeks, then bring it to your health care provider so testing can target likely causes rather than the symptom alone.

- 2. Separate evidence from interpretation** — Whether you're reading about COVID-19, nutrition or another controversial subject, distinguish what has actually been documented from what someone concludes about it. Those are two different things.

Try a simple test whenever you encounter a strong claim: “What evidence would I need to see to believe this?” Then ask what evidence would change your mind. This keeps your standard consistent even when you strongly prefer one explanation.

- 3. Go back to the original information** — Headlines, social media posts and commentary add layers of interpretation between you and the underlying evidence. When an issue affects an important decision, trace the claim back as far as you reasonably can.

Look for the original research, document, interview or other primary source. You won’t always have the expertise to evaluate every technical detail, but you’ll often spot missing context, stronger qualifications or differences between what the source says and what someone says it says.

You can practice this with the COVID-19 origins debate itself. Drafts and the submitted version of the DEFUSE proposal have been made public through a leak and Freedom of Information Act requests, so you can read what it actually described instead of relying on summaries.²

- 4. Consider who has an interest in the answer** — Gurley’s examples show why independence becomes important when an organization has to investigate events connected to its own decisions. The same principle helps you assess information in other areas.

If you’re evaluating health advice, a product recommendation or an institutional claim, ask **who funded the work**, who benefits from the conclusion and whether independent sources reached similar findings. A conflict of interest doesn’t automatically make a claim false. It tells you where independent verification becomes especially valuable. In the COVID-19 debate, that applies to any researcher or institution whose own work could be implicated by one of the origin scenarios.

5. Match your solution to the root cause — Once you identify a cause, choose an action that addresses it rather than repeatedly managing its effects. Gurley's CAPA framework follows this basic logic: identify the failure, determine its cause, correct it and prevent its recurrence.

You can turn that into a personal checklist: What happened? What evidence explains why? What can I change? How will I know whether the change worked? Whether you're evaluating pandemic policy, your health or a recurring problem at home or work, that process gives you a clearer path from identifying a problem to actually solving it.

FAQs About COVID-19 Root-Cause Investigation

Q: Why is finding COVID-19's root cause important?

A: Identifying how SARS-CoV-2 first reached humans would help determine which safeguards need improvement before another pandemic occurs. Gurley argues that prevention works best when corrective measures target an established cause rather than an assumption.

Q: Has the origin of COVID-19 been definitively established?

A: No. Natural animal spillover and a research-related incident remain competing explanations, and neither has been proven. Gurley likewise says the root cause remains unresolved and supports continued investigation of the evidence.

Q: Why does the DEFUSE proposal receive attention in the COVID-19 origins debate?

A: Gurley highlights DEFUSE because the research proposal described work involving bat coronaviruses and insertion of a furin cleavage site. He treats the document as an investigative lead, not proof that the proposed experiment occurred or produced SARS-CoV-2.

Q: How can you evaluate conflicting claims about COVID-19 or other controversial issues?

A: Separate documented evidence from someone's interpretation of it. Then trace important claims back to original research, documents or interviews whenever possible and consider whether independent sources support the same conclusion.

Q: How can you apply root-cause thinking to everyday problems?

A: Start by asking what produced the problem rather than focusing only on its immediate effects. Identify the evidence, consider competing explanations, make a change aimed at the underlying cause and track whether that change solves the problem.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

- ¹ [YouTube, All-In Podcast, Bill Gurley: Searching for Feynman, September 18, 2026](#)
- ² [U.S. Right to Know, Emily Kopp, US scientists proposed to make viruses with unique features of SARS-CoV-2 in Wuhan, January 18, 2024](#)