About VACS

The Veterans Aging Cohort Study (VACS) is an observational study that compares HIV-positive and HIV-negative veterans in care in the United States. The purpose of this study is to better understand HIV infection and how outside forces, such as alcohol use, smoking, and other diseases and infections, can influence the people living with and without HIV. The study consists of two cohorts, a “virtual cohort” that uses data from over 120,000 veterans, and a “living cohort” of over 7,000 veterans that actively participate and receive medical care at one of our nine VACS locations: Atlanta, Baltimore, Bronx, Brooklyn/Manhattan, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Washington DC. The information received from these cohorts has played a large role in increasing knowledge about HIV infection and aging and the lives of those infected. We cannot thank our Veterans enough for their continued participation in this study.

VACS IN THE NEWS

- Ryan Greysen’s manuscript, “Does social isolation predict hospitalization and mortality among HIV+ and uninfected older veterans?” won the 2014 American Geriatrics Society Outstanding Junior Research Manuscript Award.
- Daniel Weisberg was a Lipkin finalist at the 37th Annual Society of General Internal Medicine (SGIM) Meeting for his abstract, “Association of long-term opioid and/or benzodiazepine receipt and medication count with mortality among HIV-infected and uninfected patients.”
- Amy Justice was interviewed for an article in Health Affairs entitled, “Living with HIV and growing old.” by T. R. Goldman.

Why is Participation Important?

The advances the VACS study has made over the course of its existence are very substantial; however there is still a long way to go. It is not only important to know about the conditions that may go along with HIV infection, but also how to treat such conditions and ultimately improve quality of life. The information from our Veterans has allowed us to gain a vast amount of insight into aging with and without HIV infection, and we hope for their continued support and participation that will allow us to provide the best care possible.
FEATURED SITE: NEW YORK (MANHATTAN/BROOKLYN)

The New York (Manhattan/Brooklyn) site is one of our nine VACS sites across the country. Dr. Michael Simberkoff is the Principal Investigator, and works with Dr. David Blumenthal, Co-Principal Investigator of the Brooklyn site, Dr. Joseph Leung, Co-Principal Investigator of the Manhattan site, and Site Coordinators, Anne Kaminsky and Yelena Linchevskaya.
What is the STEP Trial?
The STEP Trial is a multi-site randomized-clinical trial funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. The goal of the study is to assess the impact of integrated care for unhealthy alcohol use for people living with HIV, compared to usual treatment. In other words, we are testing whether providing treatment through the Infectious Disease Clinic for patients who drink alcohol above the recommended limits helps patients cut down on their drinking compared to treatment they would normally receive.

We are actively enrolling patients at five of the VACS sites, including the Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, Manhattan/Brooklyn, and Washington, D.C. VA Medical Centers. Over 100 participants with HIV and unhealthy alcohol use have been enrolled. Participants are assigned by chance to receive usual care or treatment with a social worker, psychologist and/or addiction psychiatrist depending on how much they drink. All patients complete surveys to help us understand the impact of the intervention.

Why Study a New Treatment Approach to Addressing Alcohol?
Individuals, including those living with HIV, commonly have unhealthy alcohol use, meaning that the alcohol they consume can cause adverse effects on their health, even if they do not feel it. Among people living with HIV, alcohol use can have a variety of adverse effects on health. This includes interfering with taking their HIV medications, worsening depression, and increasing the likelihood of medical conditions, such as liver disease or heart disease. Unfortunately, patients often do not receive effective treatment for unhealthy alcohol use.

What do we hope to learn from the STEP Trial?
We hope to learn whether our approach to delivering treatment for unhealthy alcohol use with the involvement of social workers, psychologists and addiction psychiatrist within the context of Infectious Disease Clinics is an effective model. If found to be effective, this treatment approach could be adapted by Infectious Disease Clinics within the VA and elsewhere to help address unhealthy alcohol use among people living with HIV.

STEP TRIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We want to thank our study participants and research teams at each of the five participating sites. Without everyone’s hard work, this study would not be possible.

Atlanta: Dr. David Rimland, Site PI; Drs. Kelly Scheinberg and Karen Drexler, Addiction Psychiatrists; Drs. Evelyn Lemoine and Sherry Broadwell, Psychologists; Lauren Ruchin, Social Worker; and E. Clayton Carruth, Christopher Rentsch, Research Coordinators.

Dallas: Dr. Roger Bedimo, Site PI; Dr. Sidarth Wakhu, Addiction Psychologist; Julia Scott, Psychologist; Helen Lacy, Social Worker; and Holly Wise, Joyce Ghormley, Research Coordinators.

Houston: Dr. Maria Rodriguez-Barradas, Site PI; Dr. Daryl Shorter, Addiction psychiatrist; Drs. Tara Steinberg, Candy Smith, Carrie Dodrill, Psychologists; Patricia Suarez, Social Worker; Barbara Kertz, Research Coordinator.

Manhattan/Brooklyn: Dr. Michael Simberkoff, Site PI; Dr. Brian Sands, Addiction Psychiatrist; Dr. Emily Horowitz, Psychologist; Karen Stein, Social Worker; and Anne Kaminsky, Yelena Linchevskaya, Research Coordinators.

Washington, D.C.: Dr. Cynthia Gibert, Site PI; Dr. Xiaoping Shao, Addiction Psychologist; Drs. Leah Squires and Vanessa Moore, Psychologists; Kelly Haines, Erica Friedman, Social Workers; and Courtney Southard, Laura Chopko, Research Coordinators.

Dr. David Fiellin, PI
Coordinating Center team: Drs. Christopher Cutter, James Dziura, E. Jennifer Edelman, Lynn Fiellin, Nathan Hansen, Stephen Maisto, Patrick O’Connor, and Cheryl Danton, Yanhong Deng, Laura Simone.
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Article Links:
- Amy Justice’s interview from Health Affairs 2014; 33(3):359-361: http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/33/3/359.full.pdf+html

Affiliated Programs & Resources:
- Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS: http://www.cira.med.yale.edu
- American Foundation for AIDS Research (AMFAR): http://www.amfar.org
- Project Inform: http://www.projectinform.org
- US Department of Veterans Affairs: http://www.va.gov
- National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse: http://www.niaaa.nih.gov
- The Graying of AIDS: http://www.grayingofaids.org/
- Antiretroviral Therapy Cohort Collaboration (ART-CC): http://www.bristol.ac.uk/art-cc/

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QR Codes access the VACS Website and Index Risk Calculator:

[QR Code for VACS Homepage]
[QR Code for VACS INDEX CALCULATOR]
[QR Code for VACS INDEX CALCULATOR-MOBILE APP]

Funding and Affiliated Funding Sources:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

National Institute of Drug Abuse

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

National Institute of Mental Health

Veterans Affairs

Please visit the VACS website at www.vacohort.org
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