About the VA

The VACS study is built around the Veterans Health Administration (VA), which provides care to 3.6 million patients annually. The VA is also the largest single provider of HIV care in the nation, serving 19,000 HIV-positive veterans in 2003. The VA provides inpatient and outpatient medical care, pharmacy, mental-health services, substance-abuse treatment, long-term care, homeless care, and hospice services. The VA also has a national, fully electronic medical-record system that includes all routine clinical data, administrative data, and comprehensive follow-up data for mortality. The VA is home to many research projects in an attempt to improve and extend the lives of veterans.

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 HIV. The study consists of a "virtual cohort" that uses the data from over 120,000 HIV positive and HIV negative veterans to understand the overall impact of HIV. The study also consists of a "living cohort" of over 7,000 Veterans (half HIV-infected, half HIV-uninfected) that actively participate and receive medical care at one of our 8 locations:

- Atlanta
- Bronx
- Houston
- Pittsburgh
- Baltimore
- Brooklyn/Manhattan
- Los Angeles
- Washington DC

The information received from these two cohorts has played a large role in the increase in knowledge about HIV infection and the lives of those infected. Since the start of this study, the VACS team has produced over 100 publications in esteemed journals and given hundreds of talks at prestigious meetings, using the data collected from our participants. As a team, we decided to create this newsletter as a way of connecting the leaders of this study and the work they have accomplished with the study participants. Each issue will highlight a different VACS location, recent VACS publicity, and the most up to date findings by our national team. We cannot thank our Veterans enough for their continued participation in this study.
VACS Patient Newsletter

Summer 2012

FEATURER SITE: WASHINGTON, DC

The Washington, DC location is one of our eight VACS sites across the country. It is located within the Washington, DC Veterans Hospital. This site is led by Principal Investigator Dr. Cynthia Gibert, Co-Principal Investigator Dr. Robin Peck, and Site Coordinators Parisa Coffman, Kelly Haines, and Keandra McKnight. This site is currently home to 947 active VACS database enrollees. Together with the Veterans Hospital, this site works to engage participants in interesting activities such as an annual “Ladies Night” and frequent job fairs. The Washington, DC VACS site most recently participated in “Capitol Excellence Week” which consisted of a week of lunch time activities for employees and patients. Activities that offered during this week included volleyball, dancing, hula hoop competitions, card tournaments, walks, ice cream socials, and much more. The outstanding team of investigators and coordinators at this VACS site holds close relationships with participants, working together to provide the best care possible. We would like to extend a special thanks to a group of participants at the Washington, DC site for their extremely helpful input into the creation of this newsletter.

Amy Justice

Dr. Amy Justice is the Program Director of COMpAAAS and VACS. She is the Chair of the Risk Index Workgroup at VACS and also has a role in every other core and workgroup under the VACS umbrella. Dr. Justice is the Section Chief of General Internal Medicine at the West Haven, CT VA and a Professor of Medicine and Public Health at Yale University. She first graduated from Harvard University with a Bachelors degree in Biology. From there she received her M.D from Yale University, and then moved on to receive her M.S.C.E in Epidemiology from the University of Pennsylvania and her Ph.D. in Health Systems from Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

Cynthia Gibert

Dr. Cynthia Gibert is the Principal Investigator at VACS Washington, DC, and a Professor of Medicine at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. She has many leading roles in a large number of HIV/AIDS related clinical research trials as well. Dr. Gibert graduated from Sweet Briar College with a Bachelors of Arts in French Literature and from Catholic University of America in a Masters of Science in Physical Chemistry. She then went on to receive her MD from Howard University College of Medicine. Dr. Gibert was the leading voice for the creation of this newsletter as an attempt to connect with study participants.
Publicity:
Over the course of 15 years, the information obtained through the VACS study has gained recognition on a national and international level. Our most recent publicity can be seen below. (Links to articles found on next page)

- VACS Data Presented at the White House
  Dr. Justice spoke at a conference sponsored by the White House Office of National AIDS Policy at the White House earlier this year. Using information collected from the research conducted through the VACS study, Dr. Justice gave a presentation on HIV and aging to raise awareness about HIV infection among older Americans.

- Study Funding Extended into 2016
  The funding for the VACS research was just continued with a new 11 million dollar grant known as The Consortium to improve Outcomes in hiv/AIDs, Alcohol, Aging, and multi-Substance use (COMpAAAS). This new grant will include three sections: observational, intervention, and operational research. This Yale-led research consortium was granted by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and will build upon previous work, allowing the VACS project to continue into 2016.

- WXXI Wins Two Telly Awards for National Series
  National healthcare TV series, Second Opinion, won two Bronze Telly Awards in health and fitness TV program category, one of those awards granted for the “HIV in Middle Age” episode. Dr. Justice was one of many esteemed members of a discussion panel on the show discussing HIV and aging.

- 2012 International AIDS Conference
  The 19th International AIDS Conference will be held in Washington, DC in July 2012. This conference brings together experts in the field of HIV, policy makers, and those living with HIV from many different countries as a way of evaluating where we stand and determining how to most effectively move forward in the global response to HIV. As a whole, VACS will be involved in 12 presentations at this conference, including two satellite sessions featuring Dr. Justice and a special VA session also featuring Dr. Justice and VACS Los Angeles Principal Investigator Dr. Matt Goetz.

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 often times 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.

Recent Findings:
- HIV & Cancer
  In a recently conducted study it was determined that HIV-infected Veterans have a significantly higher incidence of lung cancer than those not infected with HIV. The findings of this study also suggested that HIV infection is an independent risk factor for lung cancer. Additionally, in contrast to previous studies, Veterans with HIV were diagnosed with lung cancer at similar stages when compared to Veterans without HIV. In this study, smoking was still the most significant risk factor for lung cancer among HIV-infected and HIV-uninfected individuals. This study, lead by Keith Sigel, was published in the journal AIDS, and received media attention, including a feature in the AIDSinfo newsletter, distributed by National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project, as well as an article on the newswire Reuters.

- Alcohol Associated/Interacting Conditions
  In a study focused on the most prevalent co-occurring conditions with alcohol use, data was received from over 100,000 HIV-negative and HIV-positive participants. Risk for medical diseases, other substance use, and psychiatric diseases was strongly associated with alcohol use. Results seen below:

- Physical Function in Aging HIV+/- Individuals
  In a recent VACS study, researchers determined that those with HIV infection are equally likely to suffer from decreasing physical function with age than those who are uninfected. The largest negative effect on physical function comes from concurring illnesses such as coronary heart disease and cardiac dysfunction. Physical activities such as exercise were shown to promote a higher physical function, which in turn predicted longer survival.
News Links:
● http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/11/01/highlighting-hiv-issues-among-older-americans
● http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoKH6ty5MII
● http://vacohort.org/News/index.aspx
● http://www.aids2012.org

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

Funding and Affiliated Funding Sources:
VACS is funded primarily by the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, National Institutes of Health. The study has a special focus on the role of alcohol use and abuse in determining clinical outcomes. This project is also funded in kind by the US Department of Veterans Affairs and by supplemental support from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Cancer Institute and the Medical Research Council.