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.
Dr. Robin Peck is the Co-Principal Investigator at VACS Washington, DC and an Associate Professor of Medicine at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences. She has been the sole primary care provider in the DCVA’s Southeast Community Based Outpatient Clinic for 13 years. Her interests are in community health, HIV care/research and she is the Women’s Health Director for the Washington DC VA. She received her medical degree and residency training from George Washington University.

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. Dr. Gibert received her MD from the 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.

Kelly Haines earned her Master’s degree in Clinical Social Work at The Catholic University of America. Kelly’s interest in HIV care/research started when she visited South Africa and Zimbabwe; and continued when she completed her Master’s in Public Health practicum in Swaziland, working closely with Swaziland’s “National Emergency Response Committee on HIV/AIDS.”

Keandra McKnight is one of the research coordinators for the VACS Washington, DC site and will also be involved with the Integrated Stepped Care study. She is a Junior at the University of Maryland, University College, majoring in Investigative Forensics. She enjoys working closely with patients, building relationships and making sure they receive the best care.

Photograph of the National VACS team during the 2011 Scientific Meeting in Washington, DC.

FEATURED 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 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 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.
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:

![Alcohol-associated conditions chart](chart.png)

- **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 was strongly associated with alcohol use. Additionally, tobacco use was shown to promote a higher physical function than those who did not use tobacco. Physical activities such as exercise were shown to promote a higher physical function, which in turn predicted longer survival.
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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.

Please visit the VACS website at [www.vacohort.org](http://www.vacohort.org)
For any questions or concerns please contact Angela Consorte at angela.consorte@va.gov or 203.932.5711 ext. 3541