Suck in Your Gut

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Although just two percent of a person's HIV is typically found in the bloodstream, most researchers focus on attacking the virus there. But some UCLA scientists are aiming at a reservoir that holds most of the rest—the gastrointestinal tract's lymphoid tissue. Peter Anton, MD, and Michael Poles, MD, took biopsies of the mucosal cells in the gut from 17 "undetectable" HIVers on HAART for at least three years. They found that 88 percent had detectable virus in these cells, showing clearly that the behavior of HIV in the blood does not correlate with what's happening in the lymphoid tissue. The researchers will track the mucosal virus levels over time to determine whether increases in gut HIV precede resurgence in the blood. If so, this could provide an important diagnostic tool for predicting HAART failure—and the need to change meds. In addition, they are looking at the possibility of using already available medications to get at the more than 90 percent of virus estimated to be hiding in the gut. A number of nontoxic anti inflammatory drugs might accomplish this, and the UCLA research group is beginning trials to test the possibilities. If successful, this could mean a new approach to dramatically diminishing the body's total viral burden. And because some of these meds are inexpensive, they might be available to the 95 percent of the world's PWAs who live in developing countries.

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