Finding an HIV Vaccine

September 25, 2012 By Cristina Gonzalez

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1. The Issue

While HIV meds can keep positive people healthy and simultaneously lower their risk of spreading the virus, too few people have access to treatment for it alone to stop the epidemic. Of the 34 million people with HIV on the planet, only 8 million are taking life-sustaining antiretrovirals. What's more, the rate at which people become infected is outpacing the rate at which people access care. For each person who starts treatment, two more become positive. Every day, more than 7,000 people globally contract HIV. Clearly, an effective strategy to end AIDS must include a preventive vaccine.

Therapeutic vaccines could also play a role for people living with HIV. Such vaccines could help their bodies control the virus, meaning they wouldn't have to take daily meds. So for everyone, vaccines are an essential ingredient in the end of AIDS.

Since the virus that causes AIDS was discovered in 1983, only three major vaccine trials have been completed. The first trial, called AIDSVAX, failed to prevent or control the virus. The second trial, MRKAd5, was discontinued because it possibly increased infection risk. The last trial, RV144, was mildly successful, lowering the rate of HIV infection by about 31 percent.

Since then, significant scientific progress has been made, especially in the area of discovering HIV-neutralizing antibodies and developing vaccines to prompt the immune system to produce more of them, but further research is needed. Vaccine development takes time. Focused efforts to develop an HIV vaccine have only been under way since the mid-'90s. By comparison, the polio vaccine took nearly 50 years to develop.

Vaccine research also requires money. The more funding we invest, the faster we'll make progress.

2. Why This Matters to You

From chicken pox to polio, vaccines have become one of the most powerful public health interventions available, eradicating or lowering instances of an infection. They are effective, easy to administer and require no long-term commitments from individuals. And vaccines offer an equal opportunity for self-protection among disenfranchised groups (like women, gay men, people of color, children and sex workers).

3. What You Can Do About It

Support vaccine research. Volunteer your time, donate money and use your voice. Call your AIDS service organizations and members of Congress and ask them to support initiatives for vaccine research. Do it loudly, and do it often. And talk to your doctor about volunteering for a clinical trial or study. Finally, if you can, spare a few dollars for vaccine efforts. Find out more about vaccine research at the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative's web site iavi.org.

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