



Philly High Schoolers Work on Published HIV Research

Students from Philadelphia high schools participated in HIV research at the Wistar Institute.

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Twelve high school students who worked alongside faculty researchers at Philadelphia's Wistar Institute on experiments testing a potentially promising new [treatment for HIV](#) have had their work included in a [published study](#) by researchers in West Philadelphia, according to [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#).

The students, who were part of a 2022 program aimed at diversifying the biomedical sciences, tested the effects of hopeaphenol, an anti-inflammatory, plant-based compound against a genetically engineered version of HIV unable to cause infection.

"Anybody can be a scientist," Wistar faculty member and lead study author Ian Tietjen, PhD, told the Inquirer. "It doesn't matter who you are. Right away, you can contribute to an HIV study."

Tietjen and fellow Wistar colleague Luis Montaner, DVM, DPhil, the study's senior author, said they see potential in the [student](#) experiments. In fact, Wistar scientists involved in the study believe the substance may be an effective part of HIV treatment when combined with [antiretroviral drugs](#).

According to Tietjen, even low levels of HIV—such as that present in people with a undetectable viral load—can strain a person's [immune system](#), resulting in chronic, low-grade inflammation that may give rise to cancer, [heart disease](#) and other illnesses.

Unlike current drugs that block the virus only when it becomes active, hopeaphenol seems to block virus activity at an earlier stage, thus preventing the virus from activating, according to study authors.

The students were tasked with determining whether hopeaphenol interfered with the activity of [T cells](#) needed to fend off other infections. Initial experiments found that hopeaphenol kept HIV dormant inside T cells. What's more, students also showed that the compound didn't put other T cells to sleep, a potential unwanted side effect.

Central High School junior Amal Oubbari said the Wistar faculty made the experience feel genuine. "It wasn't like our instructors treated us as kids," she told the Inquirer. "It seemed like a real

fellowship.”

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