Rare Strain of HIV Is Newly Identified

Genetic sequencing indicated that a trio of samples from 1983 to 2001 were all part of a newly established subtype L of group M of the virus.

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Genetic sequencing of a trio of viral samples collected in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 1983 and 2001 indicated that they were all part of a rare, newly identified strain of HIV, known as subtype L of group M of the virus, CNN reports. This new strain may be circulating in the DRC and potentially elsewhere.

There is no indication that this strain responds any differently to antiretroviral treatment compared with other strains or that it is associated with a different course of disease when left untreated.

Anthony S. Fauci, MD, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) told CNN about the new strain, “There’s no reason to panic or even to worry about it a little bit.”

The research was conducted by a team at Abbott Laboratories, which conducts about 60% of the world’s HIV tests, as well as scientists at the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC). They published their findings in the Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes.

Because HIV is so prone to mutation, testing laboratories like Abbott need to stay on the ball in the search for variations of the virus that may remain under the radar of their diagnostic tools.

The study focused initially on two cases of HIV from the DRC, samples of which were drawn in 1983 and 1990. These strains were atypical and did not align with other known strains. Then a study on the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV yielded a sample taken in 2001 that seemed to match the other two cases.

At that time, tools for sequencing viral genomes were not yet advanced enough to solve the mystery of whether these three cases were indeed related. Ultimately, UMKC researchers developed new methods that allowed them to fully sequence the third sample.

The conclusion: The three samples all belonged to subtype L of Group M of HIV.

“Identifying new viruses such as this one is like searching for a needle in a haystack,” study coauthor Mary Rodgers, PhD, a principal scientist and head of Abbott’s global viral surveillance program, said in a press release. “By advancing our techniques and using next-generation sequencing technology, we are pulling the needle out with a magnet.”

“This discovery reminds us that to end the HIV pandemic, we must continue to outthink this continuously changing virus and use the latest advancements in technology and resources to monitor its evolution,” said Carole McArthur, PhD, MD, a professor in the department of oral and craniofacial sciences at UMKC, and one of the study authors.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

To read the CNN article, click here.

To read the study abstract, click here.

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