



# The Pitt Men's Study

news and notes

spring 2007

## FOCUS GROUPS SHED LIGHT ON CLIENT PARTICIPATION



The Pitt Men's Study recently implemented three focus (discussion) groups with PMS volunteers to learn about their experiences at the clinic. This wasn't done because there were any major problems at the PMS. Instead, our goal was to gather

information to increase the satisfaction of volunteers, to improve the quality of services we provide, and to strengthen our ability to keep volunteers in the study.

The groups were lead by Mark Friedman, a trained focus group facilitator who is not affiliated with the PMS. Below are some of the questions we asked and the major findings we got from the groups.

**What are the main reasons why guys first come to the Men's Study?** a) to get tested to determine their HIV status, b) to take care of their own health, c) their concern for their community, and d) the perception that their involvement will be safe and confidential.

**What are the major reasons why guys stay in the study?** a) this is a way to stay healthy (e.g., health

*continued on page 3*

## RECENT RESEARCH – B CELLS AND HIV

As much as we LOVE to stick needles into our guys and ask them dirty questions, there's an actual reason why we continually collect this info from our participants.

Just down the way from the PMS clinic is Pitt's Department of Infectious Diseases and Microbiology, where much of the research involving the data we collect from our volunteers is conducted. Research performed there often leads to papers published in medical journals, which can hopefully lead to new ways of understanding how to fight and eventually cure HIV.

One of the most interesting recent findings from our researchers involves the role B cells play in spreading HIV infection throughout the body\*. B cells are a lot like T cells - they are the cells responsible for producing antibodies in response to infections. When a virus invades the body, B cells and T cells spring into action.

Although B cells do not become infected with HIV the way that T cells do, our research found that B cells play an important role as an accomplice in HIV's takeover of T cells.

B cells internalize HIV, carrying it around in the body and transmitting HIV to T cells. Our research found that a particular protein (called DC-SIGN) carried by the B cells acts as a "bridge" that HIV uses to reach the surface of T cells. Without this protein, HIV had a hard time infecting T cells.

We hope that this study can open new areas of research on the role played by B cells on spreading HIV in people who have the virus and can assist in coming up with new drugs or forms of therapy aimed at exploiting this path of HIV transmission from one cell to another.

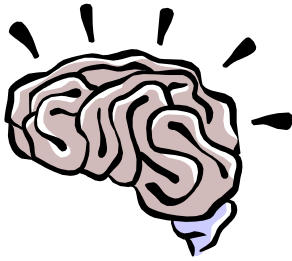
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**THE PITT MEN'S STUDY**  
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## THE PITT MEN'S STUDY PICKS YOUR BRAIN



As many of you know, the Pitt Men's Study is only one of four sites around the country participating in the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS for short).

Researchers from all four sites continually conduct studies based on data and samples collected from our men.

PMS is now leading a MACS-wide study of the relationship between the structure of the brain and the ability of study participants to perform tests of memory, learning, problem solving and other measures of brain function.

Under the direction of James T. Becker, Ph.D., who has led the neuropsychological study at PMS since its beginning, the four MACS sites will enroll 160 men in this study of brain structure and thinking.

A select group of participants, both HIV-infected and uninfected, will be contacted at each site based on such factors as their participation in MACS, age, medical history, and education level.

Because PMS has more uninfected participants than the other three MACS sites (Baltimore, Chicago, and Los Angeles), Pittsburgh will have an especially important role since we have the most men who can serve as "controls" for the other sites.

Participants will undergo approximately one hour of MRI scanning to take very detailed pictures of the brain. In addition, each participant will complete a series of tests of memory, learning, problem solving, etc. Participants will, as always, be compensated for their time and trouble.

Pittsburgh will analyze all the data, the results of which will be presented at scientific meetings and in scholarly publications.

This is very important work that may lead to new research endeavors that will also be led by PMS.

## GONORRHEA DRUGS BECOMING LESS EFFECTIVE

The CDC recently announced that gonorrhea, the 2<sup>nd</sup> most common STD in the United States, is now resistant to the class of antibiotics known as fluoroquinolones that includes drugs like Cipro.

The only class of drugs left to combat this infection are cephalosporins. Experts fear that gonorrhea will eventually become resistant to those too because of the overuse of antibiotics in humans and animals, thus leaving doctors with no antibiotics to treat the disease. Drug companies have been slow to develop new antibiotics since they are not as profitable as drugs for chronic conditions.

The CDC reports that in 2005 there were 350,000 reported cases of gonorrhea in the USA and estimates that there are probably at least twice as many people infected. Since 2000 the incidence of resistant gonorrhea has jumped from less than 1% of the reported cases to 11%.

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted infection that can infect the penis, vagina, mouth, or anus. Ejaculation does not have to occur for gonorrhea to be transmitted or acquired. The incubation period can range from 1 week to 1 month. The initial symptoms include discomfort in the penis, a thick white, yellow or green discharge from the tip of the penis, and pain or burning sensation when urinating. Gonorrhea infection following anal sex can result in anal discharge, anal itching, anal soreness, bleeding, and/or painful bowel movements. Infections in the throat may cause a sore throat but usually causes no symptoms.

Although many men have signs and symptoms with this infection, some do not. If you suspect that you may have been exposed to gonorrhea, please discuss testing and treatment options with your doctor or visit your local health department.

Using condoms during anal and vaginal sex to prevent HIV infection should also protect one from gonorrhea. However, the infection can be transmitted through unprotected oral sex as well.

(Information used in this article was reported by NPR in April 2007).

**KNOW YOUR MEDS !**



Here at the Pitt Men’s Study, we love to ask a lot of questions about our participants’ use of prescription drugs, those that are HIV-related as well as those that are not.

To facilitate this, we include a sheet with your appointment letter on which you can record any medications used since the last visit. We hope our men will fill out and bring this with them to their appointments. It’s surprising how many men cannot recall their medications, even those for conditions such as HIV, heart disease, diabetes, etc. Our study is most effective when we collect detailed and accurate information, and we ask all of our men in the MACS study to please make the effort to do this – it makes our data stronger, and can lead to new findings.

But there’s another good reason for knowing what meds you take: the unlikely but real likelihood of suddenly being taken ill or being involved in an accident. Anyone who is taking medications routinely for a specific medical condition should carry a list of them in his wallet including the drug name, the dose and the frequency taken. In case you require emergency medical care, such a list alerts doctors to medical conditions you have that could influence exactly how they treat you. You should also list the name and phone number of your primary care physician as well as any doctors treating you for any chronic conditions. This knowledge could make your recovery easier and possibly save your life.

It’s another bothersome task (and perhaps a reminder of something you’d just as soon not dwell on), but it sure helps us, and most importantly, it might help you.

**FOCUS GROUPS** *continued from page 1*

screenings), b) altruism (wanting to help fight HIV/AIDS; maybe help create a breakthrough; being supportive of other men; wanting to simply make the world a better place), c) the warm, friendly, caring, dedicated, knowledgeable, and professional staff, and d) the confidentiality of the PMS and how safe it feels to attend.

**What are the major reasons why guys drop out of the study, or lapse from time to time?** a) personal factors such as depression, addiction, and lack of motivation, b) AIDS fatigue or the feeling of being burned out by such a devastating epidemic, c) moving out of the Pittsburgh area, d) sometimes having another priority in life that must come first.

There was a unique theme among many African-American PMS volunteers. Several of these men had experienced what they described to be hardship (abuse, discrimination and/or poverty) in the past. Most of these men had overcome this hardship. These volunteers strongly felt that volunteering for PMS was a way to stay healthy and to keep fighting adversity.

**What are some things that PMS could do to increase the likelihood that volunteers will keep coming back?**

a) staying in contact with individuals who stop coming, b) greatly increasing communication concerning the impact of the study (state the difference that volunteers are making; continually communicate the purpose and accomplishments of the study), c) provide volunteers with more health-related information such as information about current treatments and their possible side effects, and what people can do to take better care of themselves, d) make communications with volunteers more “user-friendly” (briefer, in non-scientific terms).

We are using this information to improve our study. Specifically, we are going to gear our newsletter toward giving more information as to the impact of the study and the research that has come out of it. We’re also getting ready to offer regular health alerts - via both email and snail mail - to interested men who wish to stay informed of current health concerns and developments. Stay tuned.

# nix the nicotine habit

## CHANTIX: A NEW SMOKING-CESSATION DRUG

By Bridget Calhoun, MPH, PA-C

Smoking cigarettes is bad for your health — bad for your heart, bad for your brain, and bad for every other organ that keeps you alive. Yet, many people still do it; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate 44.5 million Americans smoke cigarettes. Why? Because tobacco companies have invested an unbelievable amount of time, effort and money in making sure that once you start, you can't stop!

There are tiny receptors in the brain for nicotinic acid, or nicotine, which is the addictive chemical in cigarettes. The nicotine stimulates the brain to release dopamine, a hormone that makes people feel good. Over time, the brain becomes dependent on the nicotine, making it very difficult to stop smoking, even when experiencing shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.



# Don't give up giving up.

For those determined to quit, the method of “cold turkey” may be effective, but only if they can overcome the common symptoms of withdrawal (which include jittery feelings, frequent headaches and cravings for cigarettes). For others, use of nicotine gum, nicotine patches, hypnosis or antidepressants may be helpful. It has been estimated that most people need 3 or 4 attempts before they are successful at finally kicking the habit.

If you have not been able to quit, it's never too late to try again! And now, there is another option that may

help you. The pharmaceutical company Pfizer has developed varenicline (Chantix), which was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in May 2006 on an expedited basis (fast tracked). The expedited approval was due to results of studies showing impressive rates of smoking cessation among more than 3,500 smokers.

Chantix has two important benefits. First, it reduces nicotine withdrawal symptoms; and secondly, it blocks receptors in the brain from absorbing nicotine, making smoking less enjoyable. No other medications used for smoking cessation (Zyban, Wellbutrin, etc.) have both of these benefits.

Chantix is prescribed for a period of 12 weeks during which the dosage slowly increases. The most common side effect of Chantix is nausea. Many patients are able to continue taking the medication if they stay at the lower dosages and by taking the pills with food. Chantix should not be used by women who are pregnant, or by women trying to get pregnant.

Chantix can be used safely in people with HIV infection and those taking medications for HIV infection. Healthcare providers frequently monitor kidney function in patients taking Chantix, but that is done easily with a routine blood test.

The cost of Chantix can range from \$100-\$140 per month and may be comparable to what is spent on cigarettes per month depending on the number and brand of cigarettes smoked. Unfortunately, the cost of Chantix is not currently covered by most insurance companies. However, check with your individual insurance company since some provide coverage if other methods of smoking cessation (such as antidepressants or nicotine patches) have been unsuccessful.

If you are interested in quitting smoking, please discuss all your options with your healthcare providers, and remember, the best results are obtained by using pharmacologic therapies (such as Chantix) along with smoking-cessation counseling and support from people around you!

## HIV FORUM PROVIDES INFO ABOUT NEW DRUG TREATMENTS

By Bill Buchanan

The Pitt Men's Study, along with co-sponsors Pittsburgh AIDS Center for Treatment (PACT), Pittsburgh Treatment Evaluation Unit, Allegheny General Hospital's Positive Health Clinic, and GlaxoSmithKline, presented the first of a series of HIV Educational Forums on April 4 in Oakland.

"For over 23 years, the Pitt Men's Study has been at the forefront in educating our community on prevention of HIV infection," said Dr. Charles Rinaldo, Pitt Men's Study principle investigator. "We are here to serve the community by addressing your needs and conveying the latest information related to your health."

PACT physician and PMS medical director Dr. Sharon Riddler, who spoke about advances in HIV treatment, first discussed a new formulation of Kaletra that does not need to be refrigerated, making it more useful in countries where refrigeration is a luxury.

Dr. Riddler then turned her attention to the recently approved combination drugs Epzicom, Truvada and Atripla that are new formulations of existing drugs. Atripla includes three medications and represents a major advance in treatment – a one-pill-per-day HIV regimen.

Additionally two new protease inhibitors were approved in 2007: Aptivus and Prezista. Both drugs must be given with Norvir twice a day and have shown good viral suppression in a significant number of those taking them in clinical trials.

There are two new classes of HIV medications: co-receptor inhibitors (Maraviroc) that target one of the two receptors HIV uses to infect T cells and integrase inhibitors (Raltegravir) that stop HIV's genetic material from fusing into the T cell's DNA. "These are the first new classes of oral HIV antivirals in ten years, "This has special significance for those whose HIV strain has become resistant to most if not all of the currently available antivirals."

Stuart Fisk from the Postive Health Clinic then spoke about "prevention for positives." Patients at Allegheny General Hospital's Positive Health Clinic are offered individual and group counseling by one of two HIV-

positive patient advocates. The goal of the project is "not for people to have less sex but more sex and healthier sex," said Fisk. "By assessing risky behaviors, counselors help people change their behaviors to meet the goal of a healthier sex life."

Fisk pointed to studies that show that 25% of the 1.1 million Americans infected with HIV are not aware that they carry the virus, and that this group is most likely to transmit the virus. Another 25% know they have HIV but are not in care, and they are also more likely to transmit HIV. Fisk's goal is to "get people tested and into care and help them have a healthy sex life and good drug [taking] habits in order to reduce transmission of the virus."

A panel of experts that included Dr. Riddler, Mr. Fisk, Dr. Piontkowsky of the Positive Health Clinic and Dr. Deborah McMahon of PACT then answered questions from the audience.

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### **PARTY HONORING THE STUDY'S CAB**

The members of the Community Advisory Board were honored at the Study's annual holiday party at the home of Dr. Anthony Silvestre. Dr. Rinaldo spoke warmly of the Board members dedication to the health of our community and their commitment to the study. His comments were greeted with much enthusiasm by those attending the event. Members of the Board are Co-Chairs Mr. August Pusateri (Buzz) and Mr. Bill Kaelin, and members Dr. Paul Alercon (on leave), Ms. Kathi Boyle, Mr. Bradley Burns, Mr. Michael Crawmer, Mr. Chuck Honse, Ms. Cyndee Klemanski, Mr. Floyd Patterson, Mr. Christopher Taylor, Ms. Chris Tripoli, Dr. Manny Vergis, and Mr. Richard Vinski. Staff members Jeff Toth and Ashley Woodson were also thanked for their contributions to the CAB.

In the past year, the Board has been working hard to support data gathering related to meth use and its impact on unsafe behaviors as well the Study's work on the impact of HIV medications on heart function. The Board has also been advocating for increased funding from the Governor for HIV prevention and anti-bullying programs in the schools.

# summer stuff

## SUMMER FOOD SAFETY - DON'T LET BAD POTATO SALAD RUIN YOUR DAY

Planning on picnicking this summer? There's more to look out for than just ants!

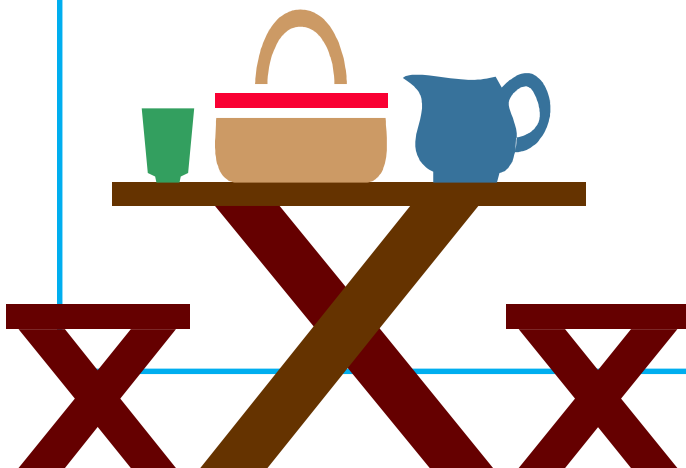
While enjoying the warm weather, picnics, and barbecues, be sure to protect yourself from getting sick. Food poisoning is caused by eating foods contaminated with harmful bacteria and usually causes diarrhea, abdominal cramping, nausea, and vomiting. Summer outdoor eating may increase your chances of eating foods that can make you ill. In order to decrease your risk of food poisoning, follow these simple recommendations:

### DO'S

- Always wash hands before eating – use warm soapy water and vigorously rub hands together for at least 30-45 seconds.
- Be sure to rinse all fruits and vegetables to remove pesticides and bacteria – Even fruit and vegetables that don't look dirty may contain bacteria
- Always cook red meat to 165 degrees – While cooking hamburgers on the grill be sure to check the color of the inside before serving. Keep cooking until it's no longer pink.
- Always cook poultry to 180 degrees – It's always a good idea to use a meat thermometer to be certain safe temperatures are reached.
- Remember to keep dairy products and foods made with dairy products refrigerated – Dairy products should not be left out during a picnic. Remove from the fridge right before they're needed and promptly return them when finished.

### DON'TS

- Never eat raw meat or fish – This includes popular dishes such as sushi, raw oysters, or steak tartare.
- Don't thaw meat at room temperature – Instead, thaw in the refrigerator ensuring that the drippings won't come in contact with other foods.
- Never use any item past the expiration date – Before buying any perishable items check the expiration date and make sure you plan to use them before the date. Also, periodically inventory items in the refrigerator to make sure nothing has expired.
- Don't eat cheese that has mold on it – When buying cheese of any kind read the label and make sure it has been pasteurized.
- Never eat fruits with soft spots that show signs of mold – When buying fruit, choose pieces that are not quite ripe so that if they aren't eaten for a few days they don't spoil.
- Never use raw eggs in mayonnaise or ice cream – Always substitute frozen egg products that have been pasteurized in recipes that call for raw eggs. When eating food prepared by someone else ask if raw eggs were used in the preparation.
- Never eat soft-boiled or sunny-side-up eggs – Runny eggs are undercooked and can cause food poisoning.



As always, eat well-balanced meals that include food from all food groups, and limit your intake of alcohol. Remember, foods contaminated with harmful bacteria don't always look or smell spoiled.

When in doubt, throw it out!

## DON'T FORGET THE SUNSCREEN!

Fifty-one thousand Americans will be diagnosed this year with melanoma, a form of skin cancer which, if left untreated, can spread throughout the body, affecting many organs and resulting in death.



The incidence of melanoma is increasing by nearly 4% a year, and melanoma is the most prevalent cancer among the 25-29 year age group. Decreasing your sun exposure, using sunscreen, checking your skin monthly, and being checked yearly by your doctor are ways to decrease your risk for melanoma.

When going outside, always use a waterproof sunscreen of SPF 30 or higher (rated for both UVA and UVB), apply it heavily 30 minutes before going out in the sun, and reapply every 90 minutes. Make sure you cover every area that is exposed including the ears. Don't stay out in the sun any longer with sunscreen than you would without it.

Don't forget to use sunscreen when taking a trip and make sure to protect those parts of you that will be exposed to the sun while inside the car (like your face and neck and that arm and hand you like to hang out the window!). There are also shirts that filter UV rays.

With early diagnosis, similar to many other cancers, melanoma is treatable in the early stages. Go to <http://www.skincheck.org> for more information on how you can protect yourself.

## SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HEALING WEEKEND

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Healing Weekend (SPHW) has been scheduled for June 8-10, and will be held at a peaceful mountain retreat center. The primary goal of the Weekend is to provide relaxation, information and camaraderie for those infected and/or affected by HIV.

The SPHW is funded by a combination of local AIDS service organizations, churches and businesses willing to support the on-going battle against HIV and AIDS. The SPHW continues to grow and is known for providing fun-filled opportunities for meeting new people, sharing personal experiences, and personal growth. Special activities include workshops, massage, bingo, motivational speakers, bonfire, and a variety of stress reduction activities. A series of 12-step meetings will also be planned for those who are interested. The cost of the weekend is \$250.00 and includes 2 nights of double occupancy lodging, all meals, evening snacks, admission to all workshops/activities and entertainment. A limited number of partial scholarships (ranging from \$175 - \$225) are available for those who complete an application and are in need of financial assistance. The deadline for registration is April 30, 2007. Those completing a registration form after the deadline will be placed on a waitlist.

Brochures for the SPHW are available at local HIV/AIDS service organizations and treatment centers. Additional information and the scholarship application can be found within the brochures. For more information please contact Bridget Calhoun at the Pitt Men's Study (412) 624-2008 or Don Finch at Persad Center (412) 441-9786, Ext #303. We hope to see you there!

# HEY!

## COME AND SEE US THIS SUMMER!

The Pitt Men's Study will be out and about this summer. You should come and hang out with us!



First off, we'll be at the Memorial Day Festival on May 28 in South Park. We'll also be manning a table at PrideFest, which is held on June 16, 2007 on the North Shore. At both events we'll be handing out informational materials, condoms, and lube as well as answering any questions you might have.

# --ALERT--

Gay and bisexual men are still being infected with HIV. The Pitt Men's Study wishes to remind you about the possibility of becoming infected by alerting you to the most common reasons given by men who become infected.

- Some men have become infected because they believe that their partner is HIV negative. But we know that some men who claim to be HIV negative are simply wrong about their status; some deliberately mislead or rely on old information that is no longer valid. Some men think that sexual partners who appear to be healthy are not infected, but this is not necessarily so. **One should treat every sexual partner as if he is HIV positive and only engage in those activities that he would perform with someone he knew to be HIV positive.**
- **Depression and alcohol/drug use - especially meth and cocaine - lead otherwise cautious men to engage in risky sexual behaviors.** It is important to be especially cautious during sex when you are feeling down or are under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Those who may have mental health, alcohol or drug problems should consider seeking professional assistance through the Persad Center or a private therapist who has experience dealing with problems related to maintaining safer sex behaviors.
- Not using a condom during anal sex is the most significant risk factor for HIV infection among gay and bisexual men. **Those who engage in anal sex should use a latex condom with a water-based lubricant every time they have anal sex.** Insertive partners should consider withdrawing prior to ejaculation to provide even greater protection to their partners.

Each person needs to assess the risk that he is willing to take. It is important that a long history of negative HIV status not create a false sense of security. No one should use a negative result to condone unsafe behavior. As we all cope with living with HIV, we need to support each other and not let our guard down.

If you have not been to the Pitt Men's Study within the last six months, you are encouraged to call **412-624-2008 (or toll-free at 1-800-987-1963)** to schedule an appointment. We also continue to enroll new volunteers for free and confidential HIV screening; please encourage your friends to call the above numbers for information on joining. Volunteers who wish to attend our educational sessions for a second time also may call to schedule. Members of our clinical staff can offer you advice on safer sex and HIV prevention.

**Remember: Prevention is still the best way to combat HIV**