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Newly Discovered HIV Variant Can Cause Patients To Develop AIDS Twice As Fast, Researchers Say



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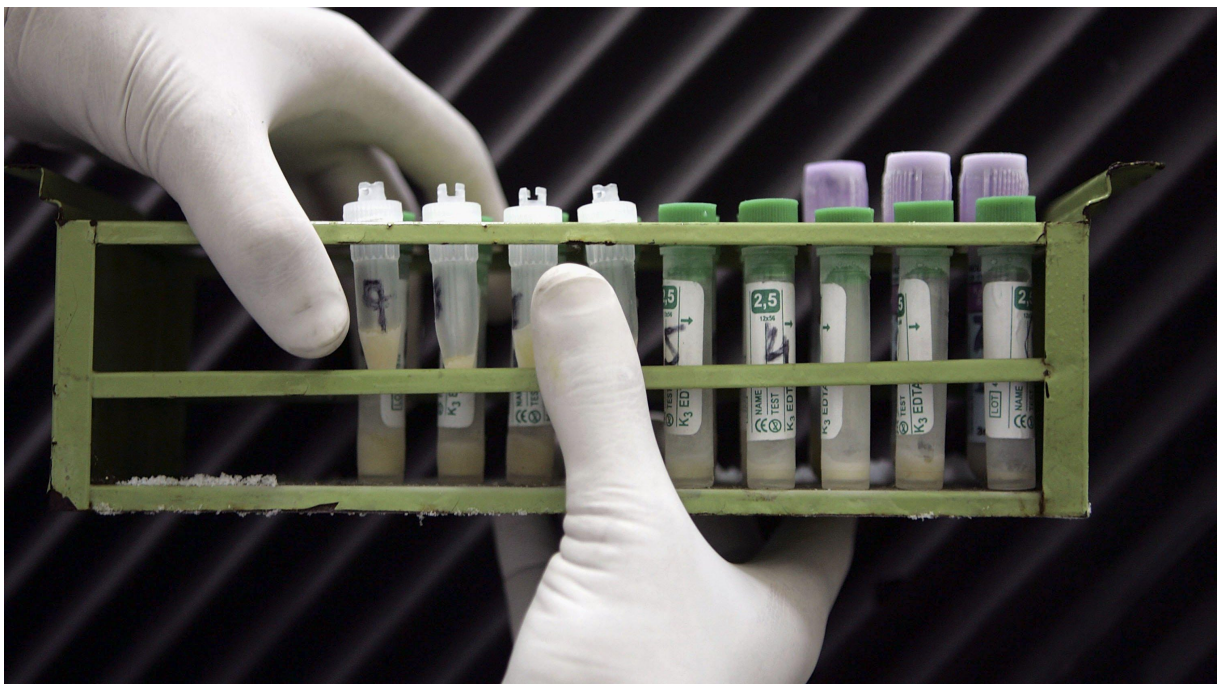
Business

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TOPLINE British researchers have [discovered](#) a new HIV variant that doubles the rate of immune system decline in infected people and can cause AIDS to set in two to three times faster than other strains of the virus, according to a paper published Thursday, daunting news as millions of HIV patients worldwide remain untreated for the virus.



KEY FACTS

- The [research](#), led by scientists from the University of Oxford's Big Data Institute, found people living with the newly discovered variant—named subtype-B—have higher HIV viral loads than those living with other variants.
- People with subtype B were also found to experience double the rate of decline in CD4, an immune cell that the virus attacks in order to replicate, compared to more common HIV variants.
- A significant enough drop in a person's CD4 count can lead to diagnosis of AIDS, which causes a severely weakened immune system.
- The variant was identified in the Netherlands, where researchers believe it has been circulating for years.
- The United Nations' UNAIDS program—which announced the research—said in a press release Monday the new variant does not represent a major public health threat, and the study's authors said the variant remains receptive to available HIV treatment.
- UNAIDS says the variant demonstrates the need for better access to HIV treatment to quell the spread of the virus, as 10 million people living with HIV worldwide are not yet receiving treatment.

BIG NUMBER

79 million. That's how many people have become infected with HIV—the virus that causes AIDS—since it was first identified in 1983, according to UNAIDS, with 1.5 million new infections in 2020. Some 36 million people

have died from AIDS-related illnesses since then, with the program deeming HIV, “the deadliest pandemic of our time.” There’s no cure for HIV, but of the 38 million people living with the virus today, 28 million are on antiretroviral therapy that keeps them healthy and effectively **prevents** them from transmitting the virus.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Moderna **announced** in January it had begun phase 1 of clinical trials for its HIV vaccine, implementing the same mRNA technology used to create its coronavirus vaccine. Researchers hope the vaccine will deliver instructions for human cells to create HIV-specific antigens in order to generate an immune response. Last year, a “proof of principle” **trial** of this vaccine approach for HIV out of the Scripps Research Institute—which has partnered with Moderna for the development of the vaccine—detected the targeted response in 97% of participants who received the jab.

TANGENT

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention **reported** people with HIV in New York—the state with the highest per-capita rate of HIV—were less likely to be vaccinated against Covid-19 than the general population, pointing to differences in demographic composition and socioeconomic status as possible reasons for the disparity. The HIV-positive population is at greater risk for severe outcomes from Covid-19, with the World Health Organization **finding** 23.1% of all people with HIV who were hospitalized with Covid-19 died. Additionally, some researchers have **speculated** that the coronavirus can mutate numerous times in the systems of HIV-positive people due to their compromised immunity, potentially causing novel variants like omicron.

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