

## **A Vaccine: Our Greatest Hope**

La Columna Vertebral (The Support Column)

By Ellen Alderton

Contrary to what you may have heard, no HIV vaccine exists. Not one to prevent the spread of the HIV virus which causes AIDS, and not one to treat people already infected with the virus. Nevertheless, the consensus among the best medical researchers both in this country and abroad is that a preventive HIV vaccine, which would protect people from contracting the virus, is the only way to stop the spread of this global pandemic.

Over the past 20 years, doctors have learned not only how the HIV virus is transmitted but also what steps people need to take to avoid becoming infected. Yet, this information has not been enough to prevent the deadly syndrome's spread. The United States alone sees 40 thousand new AIDS cases each year. Historically, to combat contagious diseases, preventive vaccines have offered the best mechanisms, and doctors credit vaccines with such successes as the eradication of smallpox and the control of polio.

Creating an effective vaccine against HIV, however, has proven much more complex than the development of other vaccines. According to Doctor Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, "This is one of the most challenging tasks a medical researcher could ever face." Why? Because other infectious diseases always leave some survivors, and these survivors' immune systems can be examined for clues to help develop vaccines. AIDS, on the other hand, is an infectious disease that eventually kills all of its victims.

In the United States, the HIV Vaccine Trial Network (HVTN) is charged with coordinating HIV vaccine studies across the country. HVTN oversees clinical testing and insures that vaccine research programs adhere to rigorous ethical and safety protocols. In fact, volunteering to participate in vaccine research is extremely safe. It is impossible to "catch" the HIV virus from any test vaccine because none of the HIV vaccines under development actually contain the virus; instead, they rely upon artificial copies of HIV.

In the United States alone, AIDS had already darkened the lives of 150 thousand Latinos. These include homosexuals and heterosexuals, drug users and non drug users, men, women and even children. Tragically, currently 600 Latino children under the age of 5 are HIV-positive in this country.

Because people of different ethnic heritages have different types of immune systems, an effective HIV vaccine can only be developed with the help of the Latino community. Indeed, a successful vaccine needs the participation of volunteers from across the broad spectrum of America's diverse population. For this reason, the HIV Vaccine Trial Network works in close consultation with a system of community advisory boards both to guide public education efforts and to ensure that researchers listen to the concerns and preferences of potential volunteers.

It could be years before a preventive vaccine is developed, but one thing is certain: An HIV vaccine is our greatest hope in the global fight against AIDS. In the words of Dr. Emilio Emini, head of vaccine research for the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, “The only thing that one can do at this point to deal with this infection is to keep it from happening, to keep uninfected people from becoming infected. And, the only way to do that is to have a successful vaccine.”

To receive a free information package about HIV vaccine research, call your bilingual help-line at 1-800-473-3003, or visit the Self Reliance Foundation’s website at [www.accesohispano.org](http://www.accesohispano.org).