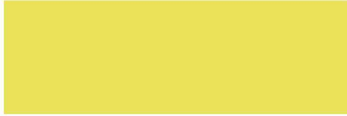


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# New HIV vaccine trial starts in SA

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South Africa has been selected to host another HIV vaccine trial, which will target various strains of the HI virus. The new trial, known as HVTN705, will be launched in the next few months.

Kathy Mngadi, the co-chair of the HVTN705 study and a senior Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in SA scientist, said: “[The current trial of] HVTN702 is a study testing a vaccine that is aimed at protecting women and men [particularly] against the subtype C HI virus prevalent in southern African populations. The new HVTN705 study is a mosaic vaccine aimed at protecting people against the diverse strains and clades [subtypes] of HIV-1 found in different geographic regions.”

It will be tested on 2 600 HIV-negative women between the ages of 18 and 35 who are at risk of HIV infection. It is expected to begin locally in October and will only reach out to other sub-Saharan African countries in January. The vaccine trial in 15 sites across the country began in December.

Mngadi said it would not be a problem to test both vaccines simultaneously because these trials, although related, were different.

“The vaccines [should] lead to different immune responses. In vaccine research, we cannot put all of our eggs in one basket, so we are testing many different types of vaccines.

“That way, if one approach fails, we have another to work with. If both work, we know which one is better to take forward.

“Enrolment [of volunteers] in HVTN702 has to be complete before a South African site recruits volunteers for the new HVTN705 study. Enrolments of study participants in the two trials will be undertaken independently,” Mngadi explained.

South Africa's epidemic remains one of the largest in the world and the country also experiences a higher number of newly acquired infections, which occur during unprotected heterosexual intercourse. Currently, it is estimated that more than 7 million South Africans are living with HIV.

Mngadi said the need for scientists to find a vaccine was not just to help South Africans, but for everyone around the world. She said that, despite an effective antiretroviral therapy programme, it was important to find an effective vaccine. In eastern and southern Africa, it is estimated that there were 19 million people living with HIV in 2015 and about 1 million new HIV infections in the same year.

“It is unlikely that we will be able to treat our way out of this epidemic,” she said.

Mngadi added that other vaccines had succeeded in eradicating viruses such as small pox, demonstrating a vaccine's power. Current efficacy trials in South Africa are scheduled to end all data collection by 2020, which will be followed by a period of data cleaning and analysis, before results can be determined.

“For vaccine field researchers, this is a very promising timeline,” Mngadi said, adding that regulators would then thoroughly review a successful vaccine - a process that will determine the timeline to license the vaccine before making it available to the general population “through governmental support for a roll-out programme”.