

Conspiracy theories not to blame for underrepresentation in HIV studies

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Even though most Americans believe some kind of conspiracy theory about HIV care and research, many are willing to take part in vaccine trials, according to a new study by Ryan Westergaard of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, published in Springer's *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. The study found no link between distrust in medical research and willingness to participate in related studies.

Westergaard and his team asked 601 Chicago residents at various shopping centers to voluntarily complete a set of 235 questions. The survey group purposely included an almost equal number of white, Mexican American and African American participants. The participants were quizzed about how much they agreed with six known HIV-conspiracy beliefs, their general trust in medical research and their willingness to volunteer for HIV-vaccine research trials.

Participants from all three groups shared the same levels of distrust in medical research. However, contrary to popular belief, the researchers found no association between the endorsement of an HIV conspiracy belief, and a general unwillingness to take part in research. Interestingly, even though African Americans and Mexican Americans were more likely to endorse HIV conspiracy beliefs, they were significantly more willing than whites to volunteer for HIV vaccine research. This observation differs from previous studies that suggest higher levels of distrust among racial and ethnic minorities lead to poor participation in vaccine research.

These results are important in light of the substantial racial and [ethnic disparities](#) in rates of HIV infection in the United States, vis-à-vis the participation of these populations in related research. While minority ethnic groups comprise a majority of those living with HIV, they are underrepresented in HIV research. It is therefore essential that investigators recruit participants from these ethnic groups in higher numbers. Westergaard and his team believe that the underrepresentation of minorities in medical research is more often because of inadequate or inappropriately targeted recruitment efforts by researchers, rather than the unwillingness of minorities to participate in such studies.

"Research involving volunteer human subjects is essential in the ongoing search for an effective HIV vaccine, and in these efforts the participation by people from racial and [ethnic minority](#) groups who are most heavily affected by HIV/AIDS, is essential," says Westergaard. "It is therefore heartening to note that the continued circulation of misinformation about HIV research and treatment is much less of a barrier to minority recruitment into HIV research studies than was previously feared."

More information: Westergaard, R.P. et al (2013). Racial/ethnic differences in trust in health care: HIV conspiracy beliefs and vaccine research participation, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. [DOI: 10.1007/s11606-013-2554-6](#).

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