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Stability is key, since HIV's evasiveness is what thwarts scientists. "This is the most difficult vaccine we've ever tried to develop," says Peggy Johnston, director of vaccine and prevention research at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. "If the variability of the flu, which changes from year to year, was expressed as a small bush, then HIV would be a very, very large tree." Still, Johnston is excited about this new development. "We do a lot of clinical research, and very few vaccines make it to this stage," she says.

The new vaccine works by using a Trojan horse approach to sneak the synthesized HIV genes into the body. Scientists hijack genes from an innocent-looking cold virus, gut them, and stuff the ersatz HIV genes inside like stowaways. The gene-impregnated cold cells are then delivered to the patient via muscular injection. Once inside the body, the vaccine triggers the immune system to seek and destroy HIV-producing cells.

Study coordinators are enrolling 1,500 volunteers in the United States, South America, the Caribbean, and Australia. Participants must be healthy, HIV-negative men and women who are at increased risk of getting HIV. "Of the 26 anti-HIV/AIDS products being tested right now, this is the most exciting one," says Steve Wakefield, director of community relations and education at the HIV Vaccine Trials Network in Seattle. HVTN is collaborating on the trial with Merck and NIAID. (For more information visit HVTN's Web site at www.hvtn.org.)

So far the data look promising. Early results show the vaccine produces a strong immune response and works across populations. "I think the challenge of our community is to balance our hope for this product with the reality of HIV vaccine research," says Wakefield. "This is just one step in learning how to make a final product that will protect us against HIV." ❁

(hivupdate)

A new vaccine takes a Trojan horse approach to fighting the AIDS virus.
By Catherine Guthrie

Concocting an HIV vaccine is like shooting a moving target—in the dark. That's because HIV mutates frequently, and this keeps the virus just out of reach. But thanks to new technological advances, scientists are creating synthetic replicas of HIV genes to trick the immune system into destroying HIV-producing cells—regardless of how well they hide.

That's the goal of a new vaccine developed by Merck. The brew contains three synthetically produced genes with names that sound like misfit Muppets—gag, pol, and nef. The copycats mirror a trio of HIV genes in the virus's core. This genetic trinity is important for two reasons: It's responsible for reproducing the virus, and it doesn't mutate even as the virus dons different disguises.