



# The Pitt Men's Study

News and Notes

Fall 2014

## Syphilis Cases Rising in PA

The Pennsylvania Department of Health in conjunction with the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) has documented an alarming increase in syphilis cases, primarily among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Allegheny County. As of September 10, 2014, the ACHD has reported 67 cases of early syphilis which now exceeds the total of 63 cases reported in all of 2013. Here is a breakdown of the data:

- 54% of the cases have been reported among individuals under the age of 30.
- 96% of the cases reported were male.
- 75% of the male cases reported with MSM risk factors (had sex with other men).
- 39% of the male cases were co-infected with HIV.

You can get syphilis and not have any symptoms, so the only way to know you're infected is to get tested with a simple blood test. And if you do have symptoms, note that syphilis has any number of symptoms that can look like symptoms from other diseases. For example, a painless sore that you may get when first infected with syphilis could be confused for an ingrown hair, zipper cut, or other seemingly harmless bump. Another

example is a rash over the body that can sometimes (but not always) involve the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. As a result of the uptick in syphilis cases, we are recommending that all sexually active MSM get a syphilis test. The PA Department of Health as well as the Centers for Disease Control recommend that all sexually active MSM receive full STD screening (including HIV) annually. The Pitt Men's Study offers testing for syphilis (as well as testing for gonorrhea and chlamydia) as part of your routine study visit. Free testing is also available at the Allegheny County Department of Health.

To find testing near you, check out the CDC testing database at <http://hivtest.cdc.gov/> To find out more about syphilis specifically, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/std/syphilis/stdfact-syphilis.htm>

## Consider Coming Out to Your Doctor



There are lots of reasons why men who have sex with men (MSM) don't tell their doctors about their sexual preferences. But whatever the reason, it is important to keep in mind that who you have sex with can have a serious impact on your health. MSM need to be aware of the unique medical issues that their heterosexual counterparts may not have to worry so much about.

For example, MSM have higher rates of HIV, syphilis, HPV, anal cancer, and hepatitis (just to name a few). In short, your doctor can help you stay on top of the added health issues if he or she knows your sexual preference.

The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association (GLMA) keeps an online list of gay-friendly medical providers. It's especially helpful if you live in or near a large city. You can go to their website, [www.glma.org](http://www.glma.org), and search under their resources link by zip code. If the

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### The Pitt Men's Study

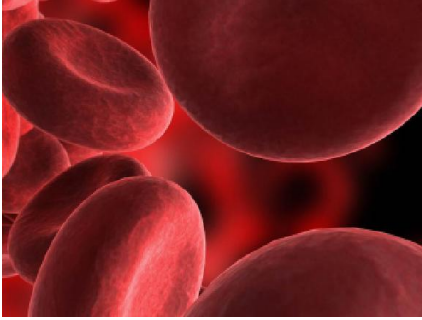
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# What Is Hepatitis and Why Do We Test For It?

by Dara Stern, MPAS, PA-C



Have you ever wondered why viral hepatitis testing has been a part of routine screening for some participants at the Pitt Men's Study? As with other sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), there is an increased risk of hepatitis A and B infections among MSM (men who have sex with men). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 15-25% of new hepatitis B infections in the United States occur among MSM, which is estimated to be only 3-7% of the U.S. population. The risk of sexual transmission of hepatitis C is also significantly higher among HIV-infected individuals.

Here is a brief review of the three most common viral hepatitis infections and how you or your partner(s) could be exposed.

- Hepatitis A is spread through the ingestion of small amounts of fecal matter. This can occur in the context of contaminated food and water (remember Chi Chi's?) or with certain sexual practices such as rimming or oral sex after insertive anal intercourse. Most cases of hepatitis A do not require treatment, resolve on their own and do not lead to long-term liver damage, but often cause an uncomfortable flu-like illness including fever, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and jaundice. Vaccination is available for those who have never been infected and is especially important for those previously infected with hepatitis C.
- Hepatitis B is spread through contact with an infected person's blood, semen, or other body fluid. Most people infected with hepatitis B as adults recover fully, but the infection can become chronic in some cases and lead to permanent liver damage. A vaccination is available for those who have never been infected.
- Hepatitis C is most commonly transmitted through exposure to infected blood, however those with HIV infection are at significantly higher risk of acquiring hepatitis C through sexual contact. Hepatitis C is often asymptomatic for years, and can also lead to chronic infection with long-term liver complications. There is currently no vaccine for hepatitis C.

The Pitt Men's Study has closely monitored its study population for new viral hepatitis infections. As of December 2013, the schedule for hepatitis testing for Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS) participants has been revised in order to reduce the amount of blood being drawn at each study visit and to focus more on new and chronic infections. The new schedule requires a full panel for hepatitis A, B, and C at the baseline visit (for new participants enrolling in the MACS), then retesting for hepatitis B and C every two years in men who remain uninfected with hepatitis B or C. Those with chronic hepatitis B infection will be followed until the infection has cleared.

If you have not previously been infected by hepatitis A or B or immunized against hepatitis A or B, you are eligible to receive vaccinations for these viruses. Please discuss vaccinations, and any associated costs, with your healthcare provider or local county health department. If you are unsure of your hepatitis status, please refer to your prior Pitt Men's Study results, consult with your healthcare provider, or ask a clinician at your next Pitt Men's Study visit. We are always happy to discuss this and any other health concerns with you.

As an additional reminder, please continue to practice safer sex. Like other STIs, viral hepatitis may be present without noticeable symptoms. You and/or your partner(s) could easily be unaware of an existing infection and risk developing liver inflammation and serious long-term liver damage.

## BOSS Study

Please call 412-624-2008 or 1-800-987-1963 within 24 hours of experiencing a fall.

**A fall is defined as an event, including a slip or trip, in which you lost your balance and landed on the floor or ground or lower level, or hit an object like a table or chair**

# You & Your Data

Questions, blood, urine, mental tests, even cups full of spit - we collect a lot from our volunteers at Pitt Men's Study appointments. So where does all that info go and what do we do with it? Below are some recent articles that appeared in scientific journals using data that you provided for us. The results aren't always groundbreaking or newsworthy - science generally moves in baby steps rather than strides - however without you and your data, none of these articles would exist.

Title of Article	Journal & Publication Date	The Gist of It
Stimulant Use and Progression to AIDS or Mortality After The Initiation of Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy.	Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes. 2014 Sept 30. [Epub ahead of print]	HIV-positive persons who use stimulants like meth experience profound health disparities. This study looked at MACS data to see if stimulant use is associated with progression to AIDS or general mortality. Findings showed that HIV-positive, stimulant-using men who have sex with men receiving highly-active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) appear to face no greater risk for mortality compared to non-users. However, HIV-positive men without AIDS at HAART initiation who more frequently reported stimulant use had modestly increased odds of progression to AIDS or general mortality.
Age patterns of Kaposi's sarcoma incidence in a cohort of HIV-infected men.	Cancer Medicine. 2014 Aug 20. [Epub ahead of print]	As the HIV-positive population ages, their risk of developing cancer also increases. This study looked at the incidences of Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) in elderly HIV-infected MACS participants. Researchers found that while incidence of KS decreases with age, older HIV-infected persons who do not receive HAART are still at increased risk of KS.
Lower adiponectin is associated with subclinical cardiovascular disease among HIV-infected men.	AIDS. 2014 Jan 2. [Epub ahead of print]	Adiponectin is a protein involved in regulating glucose levels as well as fatty acid breakdown. It may contribute to the thickening of artery walls (coronary atherosclerosis) in HIV infected people. This study found that Adiponectin levels were lower in HIV-infected men and related to the severity of atherosclerosis, independent of traditional heart disease risk factors.

## Confidentiality and the MACS



One morning in the mid-1990's two men in trench coats walked into the Pitt Men's Study clinic and handed Bill Buchanan a court order. The men were FBI agents, and the order requested a Pitt Men's Study subject's information, which the FBI wanted to review in

relation to an ongoing criminal investigation. Perhaps in a different venue Bill would have been compelled to comply with the agents' request, but in this instance Bill simply handed them a letter. The agents read the letter, walked out the door, and Bill never heard from them again.

That letter outlined the confidentiality certificate issued from the US Department of Health & Human Services. The Pitt Men's Study and the Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study (MACS) have operated under this certificate since the early days of the study, and it was just

renewed in March of 2014.

The certificate protects the privacy of research subjects in the MACS by withholding their identities from all persons not connected with MACS research. It is enforced under the authority of the Public Health Service Act which states (in part): "Persons so authorized to protect the privacy of such individuals may not be compelled in any Federal, State, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative or other proceedings to identify such individuals."

Maintaining the confidentiality of our subjects has always been of utmost importance to the MACS, especially in the early days when there was much more potential for discrimination based on one's health or sexual identity. That potential still exists, of course, and the certificate helps researchers avoid involuntary disclosure that could expose subjects or their families

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## Coming Out to Your Doctor

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GLMA database doesn't have any options near you, and you're not willing to make a road trip, you'll have to go about finding a doctor the traditional way: Meet potential providers and interview them. Ask questions, be honest. Doctors work for their patients, not the other way around. Keep shopping until you find one that you can be honest with. It may take some detective work but maintaining your health is worth it.

*This article and the syphilis article from page 1 were originally distributed via our **Health Alert** email list. Individuals interested in subscribing to the service can send an email to **PMS@stophiv.pitt.edu** with the word "subscribe" in the subject line. Members can unsubscribe at any time, and email addresses are kept private and confidential.*

## Confidentiality and the MACS

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to adverse economic, legal, psychological and social consequences.

The certificate doesn't protect confidentiality in all instances. If a subject or someone involved with that subject is in serious danger, MACS investigators may be required to release identifiable information. Additionally, the certificate does not prevent compliance with state requirements to report certain communicable diseases such as syphilis. It's also worth noting that this certificate doesn't apply for any non-MACS studies, even if they are related to HIV (though it *does* apply to any MACS-funded substudies, such as the CV, renal, or pulmonary studies). Here at the Pitt Men's Study, we are doing all we can to protect the confidentiality of our subjects who are integral to the work and research that we do.

# The Pitt Men's Study 27th Annual World AIDS Day Commemoration

Monday, December 1, 2014



Heinz Chapel, 7:30 PM

Bellefield Avenue between Forbes and Fifth  
Next to the Cathedral of Learning

Reception to follow at the Community of Reconciliation at Bellefield and Fifth  
Avenue

*For more information or assistance,  
please call 412-624-2008*