

Study: AIDS may hide for 60 years

■ In people taking anti-viral drugs, the AIDS virus could still lurk.

NEW YORK (AP) — The AIDS virus might be able to hide undetected for 60 years in people taking powerful anti-viral drugs, says a study that underlines a major obstacle to the bold notion of curing AIDS.

"We aren't going to be able to simply wait it out," said Dr. Robert Siliciano, senior author of the study.

While the drugs can drive the body's amount of HIV down to undetectable levels, they can't attack a virus that lies quietly in cells. Such hidden "reservoirs" of HIV have long been recognized, and these new calculations confirm the belief that they could harbor the virus for a very long time.

Still, "this doesn't mean a cure is impossible," said Siliciano, a professor

of medicine at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore. It means some additional therapy would have to be created to eradicate the hidden virus, he said.

Scientists have already started studying that, as well as the alternative idea of leaving reservoirs alone but revving up the immune system enough to kill any virus that emerges from them.

Siliciano also stressed that the finding doesn't mean that people who are keeping HIV at bay with current medication will go on to develop AIDS. "As long as they stay on the regimen they may do perfectly well for a long period of time," he said.

The result is "a caution against stopping treatment or thinking that having an undetectable plasma virus (in the blood) means there's no virus left," he said.

Siliciano, with colleagues at

Hopkins and elsewhere, describes a study of 34 infected adults in the May issue of the journal Nature Medicine. All were taking the powerful virus-suppressing drugs.

Researchers sampled so-called "resting" CD4 T cells from the patients' blood and used special detection techniques to find HIV in them. They then estimated how many cells were harboring hidden virus at various times over the course of treatment. From that, they calculated how long it would take for this reservoir of silently infected cells to die off.

The best estimate was about 60 years. The result wasn't a surprise, given the results of earlier research, Siliciano said. The period might be shorter in some people, he said.

The work "probably codifies what a lot of us have known for a while," said Dr. Roger Pomerantz of Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia.

Experts warn of Y2K credit scams

Frauds play to computer-bug fears

WASHINGTON (AP) — When a caller told Betty Mason he would help make sure her credit card would work after Jan. 1, she pulled the card from her wallet and was ready to listen.

But when he asked for her credit card number and promised to send a sticker that would make the card Y2K compliant, she balked. Mason was wise enough to avoid being taken, but the Federal Trade Commission fears others will lose money in this and other scams tied to fears about Year 2000 computer problems.

"It's really a new twist that someone is going to cash in on," said Mason, of Warner Robbins, Ga. "Someone is saying, 'We'll make money off this Year 2000 thing.'"

Jodie Bernstein, director of the FTC's bureau of consumer protection, said scam artists "move right in" to exploit change or vulnerability.

The problems are not limited to credit cards.

"The scams that are out there are so diverse, there is no one fix-all type of solution," said Norman Willox Jr., president of the National Fraud Center, a Philadelphia-based firm that focuses on fraud prevention and interdiction.

Consumers might see an Internet ad to buy stocks from a company that claims it has created products to thwart the millennium bug. Shareholders are assured big returns, after the third quarter, when the inventions hit the market.

In what Willox calls a "pump and dump" scheme, consumers make an investment only to have the business — or the goods they produce — turn out to be fake.

Another common scheme involves con artists calling consumers and warning that they must move their money into a separate bank account to protect it from millennium bug foul-ups. Pretending to be representatives from a bank, they ask customers for their account number to move holdings. Sure enough, the money is transferred into another account — one belonging to the caller.

"Obviously we're concerned about anyone using Y2K to scam people," said Jack Gribben, spokesman

"It's really a new twist that someone is going to cash in on."

BETTY MASON
consumer

for the president's Year 2000 council.

He advised people concerned about the Y2K compliance of their banks or credit card companies to contact these institutions directly — rather than responding to an impersonator who calls them and scares them into giving out personal financial information.

The Y2K bug occurs because many computers programmed to recognize only the last two digits of a year may not work properly beginning Jan. 1, 2000, when machines might assume it is 1900.

Because of the need to convert machines and equipment to accept this change, businesses and consumers are desperately searching for specialists to adjust their systems. But high demand and insufficient supply of these experts creates a chance for opportunists who pretend they can fix the technology, says Willox.

Companies may not figure out they've been scammed until after the millennium, when their computers fail, says Willox. In other cases, a phony business operation will tout easy solutions — such as a disk customers can buy and load onto their computer for an instant remedy.

"As far as I know, there are no fixes like that, but there are a lot of people out there promoting them," Willox said.

The FTC is working with state attorneys general and businesses to raise awareness and skepticism among consumers. For consumers who are taken anyway, Bernstein said, law enforcement is always an available option.

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