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Where did HIV come from?



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No one knows for sure where the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) came from. There are many theories, but none of them have been proven or dismissed absolutely.

What are the theories?

Many people believe that HIV was originally an animal disease that eventually crossed into humans. This sometimes happens in nature—many other animal diseases, such as the Ebola virus, have appeared among humans.

According to this theory, HIV may have come from certain types of monkeys or chimpanzees. There are monkey viruses, called simian immunodeficiency viruses (SIVs) that are closely related to HIV. Some researchers believe that one of those viruses could have turned into HIV and that by hunting and eating chimpanzees, humans may have become infected.

There are other—less likely—theories as well. For example, some people think HIV was caused by contaminated polio vaccines, or purposely created as a weapon to kill others.

At this point, no one knows the exact source of HIV.

When was the earliest case of HIV?

Many people think HIV was originally a disease found in a distant part of Central Africa and that it only began to spread as contact with Europeans increased in the twentieth century.

The earliest evidence of HIV has been found in a blood sample taken in 1959 from a man who died in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Researchers believe this strain of HIV dates back to the 1940s or 1950s and may have been introduced into humans as early as the 1930s.

When was AIDS and HIV first discovered?

HIV appeared in North America in the 1970s. Between 1979 and 1981, health authorities identified that, in certain U.S. neighbourhoods, otherwise healthy gay men were developing diseases that only happen when the immune system is weakened. They believed that an infection was causing the disease, which was later named acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). In 1983, researchers Luc Montagnier and Robert Gallo discovered the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.

For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the
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