
Update on HIV/SIV infections in Cameroon

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The high degree of human immunodeficiency virus type 1 (HIV-1) diversity in the Cameroonian population indicates a relatively old epidemic in this country. However, studies of pygmy 'hunter-gatherers' show only rare HIV-1 infection, mainly after contact with Bantus rather than from contact with non-human primates.

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Several independent studies have reported an extreme diversity of HIV-1 viruses in Cameroon. Almost all the HIV-1 group M subtypes (A–H), HIV-1 mixed infections, inter-subtype recombinant viruses and infections with HIV-1 group O viruses have been characterized (Mboudjeka *et al.* 1999a,b). In addition, infections with HIV-1 group N viruses have also been reported. The high degree of diversity could reflect a long duration of lentiviruses in the Cameroonian population, which contrasts with the relatively low-to-moderate HIV prevalence in the country (0.5% in 1985 versus 8% in 1999) compared with other African countries where HIV is less diverse.

Recent studies have indicated genetic relatedness between SIVcpz and HIV-1 group N viruses. It has been hypothesized that AIDS resulted in a zoonosis transmission of SIVcpz and SIVsm from infected animals to humans via blood contacts in west Central Africa.

Pygmies are traditionally hunter-gatherers and are considered to be one of the oldest ethnic populations in Central Africa. J. P. Gonzalez has demonstrated their susceptibility to HIV. They have been (and are still) frequently and directly exposed to non-human primate blood during hunting, slaughtering and cooking. They are generally isolated from the other ethnic groups even though contacts with neighbouring tribes are not unusual. Surprisingly, HIV/SIV infection among pygmies was rather rare or uncommon between the 1980s and 1990s (Ndumbe *et al.* 1993; Kowo *et al.* 1995). In recent

surveys carried out in selected areas in Cameroon, the HIV prevalence in this population group seems to be increasing as a result of their contacts with neighbouring Bantus (Mbopi Keou *et al.* 1998). The possibility of a more recent introduction of HIV in this community should not be ruled out. Ongoing studies among highly exposed individuals to SIVs and wild-living primates might provide new information.

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