

YOUR GUIDE
TO HEALTH
IN SOUTHERN
NEVADA

VIEW ON HEALTH

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CANCER RESEARCH

Clinical trials advance treatment

For many cancer patients, clinical trials provide the best treatment options

By EDMUND MEINHARDT
VIEW ON HEALTH

Medical research helps usher in new treatments and future standards of care, but it can also provide immediate help for patients who have limited options or no longer respond to standard treatment.

A clinical trial is a strictly controlled test of new drugs, devices or procedures on human subjects. It is the last stop on a long journey that begins in a laboratory, often with animal testing.

"Clinical trials are key to advancing cancer care in the U.S. and in the world," said Matt Galsky, a medical oncologist with Comprehensive Cancer Centers of Nevada. "Advances in the last 50 years have been intermittent. There have been some home runs, but most have been base hits."

Only a tiny percentage of adult cancer patients participate in clinical trials, Galsky said. A much higher percentage of children with cancer are clinical trial participants. This is because adults are more likely to have other health problems in addition to cancer, such as diabetes or heart disease, which might make them unsuitable candidates. Cancer is also much more rare in children.

One of the goals of medical research, especially with AIDS and cancer, is developing treatments that are easier for patients to tolerate. Drug therapy for these diseases has long been associated with severe side effects.

There have been major advances in the treatment of breast cancer just in the past 20 years, Galsky said.

"Breast cancer treatment is much more targeted now," Galsky said. "We can examine specific proteins on the cancer cells and determine which treatments are most likely to work. We couldn't do that 20 years ago."

In the past, treatment was applied to all patients, but only a portion would benefit. The targeted approach applies

CLINICAL TRIAL BASICS

TYPES OF CLINICAL TRIALS

Treatment
Prevention
Early detection
Diagnostic
Quality of life and supportive care studies

CLINICAL TRIAL PHASES

Phase 1: Determining safe dosage and dosage schedule

Phase 2: Determining the effectiveness of a known safe dosage and schedule

Phase 3: New treatment compared to older standard of care

ON THE WEB

For information on clinical trials, go to www.clinicaltrials.gov
For clinical trials specific to cancer treatment, go to www.cancer.gov/CLINICALTRIALS

IN LAS VEGAS

The Nevada Cancer Institute
www.nevadacancerinstitute.org
Comprehensive Cancer Centers of Nevada
www.ccnevada.com
The Nevada Cancer Research Foundation
www.snrcf.org

the treatment to the segment of the population that is most likely to benefit, and avoids subjecting the other patients to debilitating side effects.

Clinical trials attempt to answer several questions about new therapies and interventions. What is the safe dose? What schedule will work best? How effective is the safe dose? How does this compare with the old standard of care?

Clinical trials are designed, conducted and evaluated according to rigorous protocols. The researchers must outline the objectives, design and methodology according to strict standards. The study must take reasonable steps safeguard the health of the participants while attempting to answer specific research questions.



JUPITER IMAGES

Clinical trials answer research questions and create new treatments while providing benefits to many patients. Only a small percentage of adult cancer patients participate in clinical trials, often because they are receiving treatment in areas where clinical trials are unavailable. Las Vegas has several facilities conducting clinical trials, and some offer treatments that aren't available anywhere else.

Patients participating in clinical trials are carefully monitored and assessments of the new therapy's effectiveness as well as the health of the patients are made at regular intervals. A lot of this cutting-edge research happens right here in Las Vegas. The Nevada Cancer Institute, Comprehensive Cancer Centers of Nevada, the Nevada Cancer Research Foundation and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center all conduct clinical trials in Las Vegas.

"Patients should ask their doctors about clinical trials available in the area," Galsky said. "There are also searchable databases on the Internet."

Practitioners at the Nevada Cancer Institute develop, design and write research protocols to investigate very specific types of cancer. Giuseppe Pizzorno, Ph.D., Pharm.D. is vice president of operations, associate director for translational research and division head of drug development at the Nevada Cancer Institute. Pizzorno is one of a cadre of research scientists collaborating with

specialists to create cancer research protocols, and he says adult cancer patient participation in clinical trials is usually well below 5 percent of total patients at the institute.

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MATT GALSKY
MEDICAL ONCOLOGIST

Even so, patients come from outside the area to participate in clinical trials there.

"About 10 percent of our patients come from outside the area — from Utah, Arizona, California and elsewhere in Nevada," Pizzorno said.

Kenneth A. Foon, M.D., head of the leukemia section and acting director of the Nevada Cancer Institute's phase I program, says adult participation in clinical trials is low for many reasons.

"For the most part, the issue is availability," Foon said. "Most adults with cancer are treated in a community setting where research protocols are unavailable."

Foon recently developed an improvement in leukemia therapy, and the results were published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*. He said a distinguishing characteristic of the Nevada Cancer Institute is the level of specialization among the practitioners, and that this makes it possible for the Nevada Cancer Institute to offer clinical trials and treatments that are available nowhere else.

"We're all sub-specialized," Foon said. "I only deal with blood cancers."

Foon said patient outcomes in clinical trials are often much better than the standard course of treatment because they are so carefully monitored and regularly

assessed.

The Nevada Cancer Research Foundation, with more than 50 oncologists seeing patients throughout Nevada, is a member of a network called the Community Clinical Oncology Program, or CCOP. The CCOP makes state-of-the-art clinical trials sponsored by the National Cancer Institute available to local communities.

Comprehensive Cancer Centers of Nevada has partnerships with the U.S. Oncology Research Network, which conducts research at 170 locations throughout the country, and Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center at UCLA.

Ramu Komanduri, M.D., chief of staff at the Veterans Affairs Southern Nevada Health Care System, says that a clinical trial may be one of only a few options available to a cancer patient.

"There may not be 10 options available, especially in a rapidly moving and changing area like cancer," Komanduri said. "Clinical trials play a pivotal role in treatment."

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