

NIH cancels 'Havana syndrome' research, citing unethical coercion of participants

[cnn.com/2024/08/30/health/nih-havana-syndrome-study/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2024/08/30/health/nih-havana-syndrome-study/index.html)

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New report links secret Russian intel unit to 'Havana Syndrome' cases

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CNN —

The National Institutes of Health said Friday that it is stopping its research of what's commonly known as Havana syndrome, a mysterious illness experienced by a number of spies, soldiers and diplomats who have reported sudden debilitating symptoms of unknown origin.

The NIH said it would end the work “out of an abundance of caution” after an internal investigation found that people had been coerced into to being part of the research.

The coercion, the agency specified, was not on its own part, but the NIH did not elaborate as to who may have forced the participation. However, it noted that voluntary consent is a fundamental pillar of the ethical conduct of research.

Some of the people who reported being sick previously claimed that the CIA made them join the research as a prerequisite for getting health care.

A CIA official said the agency takes “any claim of coercion, or perceived coercion, extremely seriously and fully cooperated with NIH’s review of this matter, and have offered access to any information requested.”



The official told CNN the CIA Inspector General is aware of the NIH’s findings and the prior related allegations.

“We greatly value the efforts of the scientific community to better understand these reported health incidents. CIA remains committed to ensuring continued access to care for affected officers and to fully investigating any reports of health incidents,” the official said in a statement.

“They wanted us to be a lab rat for a week before we actually got treatment at Walter Reed — and at bare minimum, that is unethical and immoral,” Marc Polymeropoulos told CNN in May.

Polymeropoulos, a former CIA officer who says he has been sick, is an advocate for those struck by what the US government calls “anomalous health incidents.” He said in May that he believes that participation in this research was “ordered” by senior leadership at the CIA.

In March, the CIA issued a statement that denied that people were required to participate. The agency did not respond to CNN’s request for comment Friday.

Forced participation in a study is considered highly unethical and is extremely uncommon, ethicists say.

The NIH said Friday that it shared the update with JAMA, the medical journal that in March published two studies that have come out of the research. JAMA did not respond to CNN’s request for further comment.

The NIH said that although it is stopping this research, this decision does not change the conclusions.

Despite federal employees’ reports of symptoms, neither study found anything definitive that would cause health problems.

video

In one study, NIH researchers took a closer look at the brains of people who were believed to have Havana syndrome and found no consistent evidence of brain injury. There were also no significant differences between that group and a healthy comparison group.

In the second study, NIH scientists ran a battery of tests on 86 US government staffers and family members who reported Havana syndrome, comparing them with 30 people who had similar jobs but no such symptoms. By most clinical and biomarker measures, they found, the two groups were the same.

In an editorial published in JAMA along with the studies, Dr. David Relman, a professor of microbiology and immunology at Stanford who worked on earlier investigations of this patient population, argued that although the study involving brain scans appeared to show that “nothing, or nothing serious” happened with these cases, coming to this conclusion “would be ill-advised.”

Other research has found evidence of abnormalities in the brain, he said, and the same is true for the study involving the tests. Because the condition can look different in each person, he said, doctors don’t have specific tests that can fully determine what’s wrong.

“Clearly, new, sensitive, standardized, non-invasive tests of nervous system function, especially involving the vestibular system, are needed, such as more specific blood markers of different forms of cellular injury,” Relman wrote.

The illness and its cause have remained frustratingly opaque to both the intelligence community and the medical community investigating its origin.

The illness was dubbed Havana syndrome because it emerged in late 2016 in the Cuban capital. Some American diplomats reported symptoms that were consistent with head trauma, including dizziness and extreme headaches.

Since then, at least 1,500 cases have been reported by US personnel stationed in 96 countries, officials said last year.

There was longstanding speculation about a new kind of weapon as the cause of these illnesses, but the US intelligence community said last year that it cannot link any cases to a foreign adversary, ruling it unlikely that the unexplained illness was the result of a targeted campaign by an enemy of the US.

CNN’s Katie Bo Lillis contributed to this report.