

Henrietta Lacks



The world owes much to Henrietta Lacks. Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman whose cells were removed during a biopsy in 1951 – and used for research without her knowledge or approval. A few months after Henrietta's diagnosis of cervical cancer, she died at the age of 31 years old. She never would know that more than six decades later, her cells would continue to grow and provide a foundation for advancements in science and medicine.

Henrietta's cells revolutionized the field of medicine. Her amazing and immortal cells (commonly known as HeLa cells) have been used for decades in biomedical research - to study cancer, the effects of radiation, and AIDS – among many other areas. Her cells led to the development of successful drugs in fighting human diseases, such as leukemia, hemophilia, herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV), Parkinson's disease, and influenza, among others.

1920

Henrietta Lacks was born Loretta Pleasant on August 1, 1920, in Roanoke, Virginia to Eliza and Johnny Pleasant.

1941

On April 10, 1941, Henrietta Pleasant married David "Day" Lacks

1951

A biopsy of Henrietta Lack's tumor was taken and sent to the lab of Dr. George Gey resulting in the creation of HeLa cell line.

1952

Scientists used HeLa cells to help develop the polio vaccine.

1973

Scientists used HeLa cells to study the behavior of salmonella inside human cells.

1984

HeLa cells were used by a German virologist to help prove that the human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cancer.

1986

The virus infection mechanism of HIV was studied by scientists who infected HeLa cells with HIV.

1993

HeLa cells were used to study tuberculosis.

2013

On August 6, 2013, the NIH announced an agreement with the family of Henrietta Lacks to allow biomedical researchers controlled access to the whole genome data of HeLa cells.

