

Henrietta Lacks' "immortal" cells

By Smithsonian.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.21.16

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Level **510L**



TOP: Henrietta Lacks' (left) cells were essential in developing the polio vaccine and were used in scientific landmarks such as cloning, gene mapping and in vitro fertilization. (Courtesy of the Lacks family). SECOND: Scanning electron micrograph of just-divided HeLa cells. Courtesy of National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Would you want to live forever? One woman is doing just that. Not her body and mind. Some of her cells.

Cells are the building blocks of life. We are all made up of cells.

Scientists study them to learn more about people. They learn about things that harm us and try to keep us from getting sick.

Scientists do this by collecting people's cells. Then they grow more cells in a lab.

In 1951, a scientist in Maryland created the first everlasting cell line from a person. The cells came from a young black woman. She had cancer.

Cells Named HeLa

A doctor took a piece of her tumor without telling her. The doctor sent the tumor cells to scientists.

The cells were named HeLa. These are the first two letters in Henrietta and Lacks. Henrietta's real name wasn't known until the 1970s.

Her cells never died. No one knows why. They have been important. Her cells helped make medicine. Her cells even went to outer space so scientists could study what would happen to them there.

All along, no one knew much about the person these cells came from.

Then, Rebecca Skloot wrote a book published in 2010. It is called "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks." Skloot tells the amazing story of the HeLa cells.

Learning Henrietta's Story

Skloot first learned about Henrietta at school. Skloot's teacher knew Henrietta's real name and that she was black. But that's all he knew. Skloot later decided to find Henrietta's family and write a book.

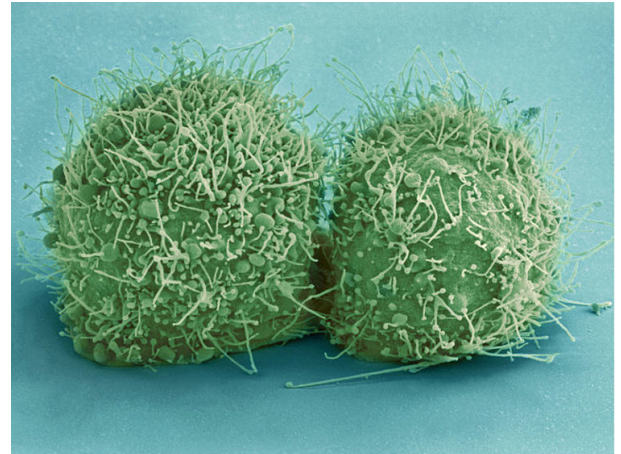
Henrietta's daughter, Deborah, helped Skloot. Deborah wanted to know more about her mother, who had died when Deborah was a baby. Skloot talked with other family members, too.

Later, a scientist found even more of Henrietta's cells. Many of the cells were thought to be from other people. The HeLa cells must have floated on dust and traveled on unwashed hands into other cells.

Lessons From The Book

Science today often uses cells of some kind. But, the people behind those cell samples are usually left out of the decision-making process. Henrietta never knew her cells were being used by scientists. For a long time, her family did not know either.

Skloot hopes people don't think collecting and growing cells is bad. Medical research today depends on it. We would not have many tests, medicines and vaccines if it wasn't for this. Or, if it wasn't for Henrietta.



Quiz

- 1 Based on the article, which of the following is TRUE?
- (A) The HeLa cells were named after the scientist who took them.
 - (B) The HeLa cells have been sent to outer space and helped to make medicine.
 - (C) Henrietta Lacks helped Rebecca Skloot write her book.
 - (D) Henrietta Lacks knew that the scientists were taking her cells.
- 2 What is one reason why a doctor took samples of cells from Henrietta Lacks?
- (A) because they helped him find the cure for her cancer
 - (B) because he wanted to figure out why Henrietta was living forever
 - (C) because he wanted to write a book about Henrietta's life
 - (D) because he wanted to send them to scientists to study
- 3 Which sentence from the article explains how Rebecca Skloot feels about using cells for science?
- (A) Henrietta's real name wasn't known until the 1970s.
 - (B) Skloot later decided to find Henrietta's family and write a book.
 - (C) Henrietta never knew her cells were being used by scientists.
 - (D) Skloot hopes people don't think collecting and growing cells is bad.
- 4 What does the author of this article want to explain?
- (A) how Henrietta Lacks got cancer as a young girl
 - (B) the way cells work in the human body
 - (C) why the story of Henrietta Lacks' cells is important
 - (D) the things Rebecca Skloot learned in school