

Study finds virus-sex-cancer link

By JONATHAN BOR
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BALTIMORE — The vast majority of cervical cancer cases worldwide are acquired from sexually transmitted viruses, according to researchers from the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health.

It is now clear that cervical cancer should be fought as an infectious disease, scientists said, perhaps with a vaccine that would enable the body to hold the virus at bay before it has a chance to trigger cancer. The scientists, who examined tumors from 22 countries, found viral evidence in 93 percent of the cancers.

"This establishes that a sexually transmitted agent is responsible for one of the most important cancers in women," said Dr. M. Michele Manos, a visiting scholar at Hopkins.

Cervical cancer is the second-most common cancer in women worldwide and, by far, the most common and fatal in developing nations. There are about a half-million new cases each year, 80 percent of them in Third World nations.

A broad family of viruses — the

human papillomaviruses — has long been implicated as a major risk factor for cervical cancer. The viruses may be the most common sexually transmitted agents in the world, though only a small percentage of infected women develop cancer.

Manos said the study all but ruled out the possibility that cervical cancers are caused by viruses in some parts of the world, but not in others. Without this understanding, she said, scientists would have no way of knowing whether a vaccine would be an effective global strategy against the viruses.

Efforts to develop a vaccine are far from complete.

The Hopkins study found that more than 20 different types of human papillomavirus were associated with cervical cancers, although one appeared in half of the specimens. None of the viruses cause noticeable symptoms until they trigger the development of cancerous lesions, at which point the woman can experience bleeding.

More pap smears needed

WASHINGTON — Many older women are at particular risk of invasive cervical cancer because they are not seeking a simple test that can detect the disease early enough

to cure or even prevent it, researchers reported yesterday.

A study of 481 women diagnosed with cervical cancer after the disease became advanced found almost 29 percent had never had a Pap smear, a test recommended every one to three years.

The average age of these women was 64 — 20 years older than the average woman who is properly tested, researchers report in the June edition of the American Journal of Public Health.

"Every case of invasive cervical cancer is preventable," said study author Dr. Dwight Janerich of the University of Utah. "My hope is that this study kicks off a new chapter of concern about the Pap test."

The Pap smear is a simple test in which cervical cells are scraped off and checked for malignancies and for precancerous changes in cells that, if removed, can prevent cervical cancer. It is recommended annually once women reach age 18 or become sexually active. After three consecutive normal tests, doctors may recommend low-risk women have the test as seldom as every three years.

Information for this story also was gathered by The Associated Press.