No Simple Markers of HPV Risk in Older Women

BY SHERRY BOSCHERT
San Francisco Bureau

VANCOUVER, B.C. — There's no easy way to identify older women whose risk for human papillomavirus infection is low, so physicians should continue cervical screening unless the woman has tested negative consistently for the virus, Concepcion Diaz-Arrastia, M.D., and her associates advised in a poster presentation at the 22nd International Papillomavirus Conference.

Nineteen (11%) of 176 women older than 55 years tested positive for infection with high-risk or intermediate-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) in a prospective, longitudinal study, they reported at the conference, sponsored by the University of California, San Francisco.

"High-risk HPV infection is not restricted to young women," said Dr. Diaz-Arrastia of the University of Texas, Galveston, and her associates.

All the women completed a detailed medical and sexual history form and underwent a pelvic exam. The study found no clear social markers of risk for HPV infection in this group of older women, whose mean age was 67 years.

More than a third of the HPV-positive women said they had been sexually inactive for more than the past 5 years. There were no significant differences between the HPV-positive and negative women in terms of the traditional social risk factors for cervical neoplasia, including a history of first sexual activity before age 16, number of lifetime sexual partners, presence of other sexually transmitted disease, history of sexual abuse, or smoking habits.

Pap results did not correlate with risk for infection. In the HPV-positive group, two women had atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASC-US), and one woman had low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesions (LSIL). In the HPV-negative group, Pap results showed ASC-US in five women and LSIL in one woman. ■