

Health

Many unaware of scans' risks

Experts clarify intervals, ages for cervical cancer screening

SAN FRANCISCO, April 1, (Agencies): The American College of Physicians (ACP) has released best practice guidelines to reduce overuse of cervical cancer screening for average-risk women, including what ages screening should start, stop and how many years to wait between each test.

"Guidelines recommend not screening prior to age 21, screening no more frequently than every 3 years and ending screening among low-risk women," said Dr George F. Sawaya of the University of California, San Francisco Center for Healthcare Value, who coauthored the new guidelines.

Low-risk women do not have a history of previous precancerous lesions or cervical cancer, an HIV infection, previous organ transplantation or uterine exposure to a synthetic estrogen called diethylstilbestrol.

For those without these risk factors, the ACP recommends screening for abnormal cells, called cytology, with a cervical scrape (Pap smear) every three years starting at age 21.

At age 30, this can be combined with a human papillomavirus (HPV) test and performed every five years until age 65. After 65, cervical cancer screening should stop if the woman has had two consecutive negative cytology and HPV tests or three negative Pap smears in a row.

If a woman has a hysterectomy with removal of the cervix, she should no longer be screened for cervical cancer, regardless of age, the ACP guidelines committee writes in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

The guidelines, which are supported by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Society for Clinical Pathology, are not new, but this continues to be a confusing issue for doctors and women, according to Dr Mark Schiffman of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland.

Overscreening average-risk women can cause discomfort with speculum examinations, pain and bleeding with cervical biopsies and excisions, and false positive results, which would lead to further inappropriate testing, the authors write.

Surgical excisions of the cervix that are used to treat HPV infection carry a small risk of cervical rupture, early birth or miscarriage during pregnancy, Schiffman said. Another important consequence of overtesting is patient anxiety and fear, he said.

"Cervical cancer is caused almost entirely by a dozen or so strains of HPV," Schiffman told Reuters Health.

New HPV infections almost always go away without causing lasting damage within a couple of years, so finding new infections and doing something about them can be premature, especially for very young women, as the HPV vaccines become more common, he said. The national rate of cervical cancer among women under age 25 is vanishingly small, he said.

It is also extremely rare to acquire a new HPV infection that progresses to cancer after age 65, he said.

"We have a tradition of annual screening in the US and clinicians and women have been fairly resistant to less-than-annual testing," Sawaya told Reuters Health by email.

"Women have not been well informed about the benefits and harms of overscreening," he said. "Guidelines recommending less screening have been viewed suspiciously as a cost-saving measure rather than an attempt to strike a better balance of benefits and harms."

Old habits, like yearly screening, die hard, Sawaya said.

"Screening is now maldistributed," Schiffman said. "Some women get way too many screens in their lifetime and are reluctant to back away from screening."

Screening for cervical cancer every year is like taking your blood pressure or cholesterol level every half hour, he said. "There's an interval to things."

While cervical cancer screening is often overused in the US, in other countries it is more often underused and these guidelines may not always apply, he noted.

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Medical scans: Over half of people receiving medical scans such as X-rays do not know if they are exposed to radiation and many have unanswered questions even as they are waiting to undergo the test, a

Progress hailed

Polio eradicators aim to finish job

LONDON, May 1, (RTS): The world is closer than ever to being able to wipe out polio, international experts said on Thursday, with zero cases of the crippling disease recorded across all of Africa this year and fewer than 25 globally.

Polio eradication specialists are wary of claiming premature success and warn complacency could prove the project's downfall, but with only two countries, Pakistan and Afghanistan, reporting polio cases in 2015, they see an end in sight.

"We've never been in a better place to hold hopes of being able to eradicate this disease once and for all," said Peter Crowley of the United Nations children's fund UNICEF.

Jay Wenger, head of polio eradication at the Gates Foundation, told reporters: "The progress is very impressive. We're looking forward to finishing the job."

"We don't think we can declare victory, but we've never gone anywhere near this long without any wild polio virus being found in Nigeria or in Africa as a whole," he said on a telephone briefing with experts from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) and the US Centres for Disease Prevention and Control.

Polio is a viral disease that invades the nervous system and can cause irreversible paralysis within hours. It can spread rapidly, particularly among children and especially in unsanitary conditions in war-torn regions, refugee camps and areas where healthcare is limited.

In 1988, when the GPEI was formed to lead a battle to wipe it out, polio was endemic in 125 countries and paralysed nearly 1,000 children a day. Since then, thanks to huge vaccination campaigns, there has been a more than 99 percent global reduction in cases.

But the WHO's repeated warning is that as long as any child anywhere remains infected with polio, all children are at risk.

small US survey found.

Previous studies have shown that when patients have more information and can share in the decision-making process, they have less anxiety and more satisfaction with their treatment, the study authors write in the *Journal of the American College of Radiology*.

Dr Andrew Rosenkrantz, lead author, told Reuters Health that while the United States performs a high volume of medical scans, many patients are not informed about what the tests entail.

"We did this study seeking to gain insights into just how well patients understood their own tests that they were about to undergo," Rosenkrantz, an associate professor of Radiology at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City, said in an email.

The study team recruited 176 patients who were waiting to have medical imaging scans, including CT and nuclear medicine scans, which involve radiation, and MRI and ultrasounds, which do not.



US Public Health Service vice admiral and US surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, delivers a speech in the US treatment unit for Liberian healthcare workers infected with Ebola, during the site's decommissioning on April 30, in Monrovia. (Inset): The picture shows a tarp with words and handprints in yellow paint in US treatment unit for Liberian healthcare workers infected with Ebola, during the site's decommissioning. (AFP)

Liberia closes US-built Ebola unit

The United States decommissioned its treatment unit Thursday for Liberian healthcare workers infected with Ebola, with the country set to be declared free of the virus within two weeks.

"Officers from the US Public Health Service Commissioned Corps staged a parade at the Monrovia Medical Unit (MMU) as President Ellen Sirleaf

Johnson urged Liberians to learn lessons from the worst outbreak of the virus in history.

"When our nation was in terror, people were running, running to nowhere, because they did not know what they were running from or where they were running to," said Sirleaf.

"People were dying not knowing what

they were dying from. People could not touch their dead ones. Until now, when we wear an ambulance, we are afraid."

Liberia is one of three countries, together with Guinea and Sierra Leone, that were ravaged by an epidemic that has killed around 11,000 people since December 2013, more than 500 of them healthcare workers.

The west African nation is close to recovery, however, with May 9 earmarked as the day it will be declared "Ebola-free", 42 days after the last known case was buried.

Three Ebola treatment units closed this week, according to the World Health Organization, leaving 13 clinics operational but empty. (AFP)



A pregnant Albanian woman lies on a bed while doctor looks at the foetus on a monitor as he carries out a sonogram on April 20, in Tirana. (AFP)

Health

FDA OKs Breo Ellipta: The Food and Drug Administration on Thursday approved the sale of Breo Ellipta as a once-daily treatment for asthma in patients aged 18 and older. GlaxoSmithKline and Theravance Inc said.

The FDA under acting Commissioner **Dr Stephen Ostroff** declined to approve Breo for younger asthma sufferers. The agency, in a so-called complete response letter, told the companies that additional data would be required to further demonstrate Breo's safety and efficacy in that population.

The FDA's decision came after an FDA advisory panel of experts had voted 16-4 that Breo Ellipta should be approved for use by adults. It voted 19-1 that available data did not support approval for use in children aged 12 to 17.

Breo Ellipta should not be used for the relief of acute bronchospasm, the companies said.

Bernstein analyst **Tim Anderson** had forecast Breo sales reaching \$750 million in 2020.

The drug consists of a corticosteroid, which reduces inflammation, and a long-acting beta-agonist called vilanterol, which is designed to open the airways. (RTS)

Bird flu cases in Iowa: The highly pathogenic H5N1 avian flu turned up in initial tests at five more farms in Iowa, including a commercial egg operation housing up to 5.5 million birds, Iowa's agriculture department said on Thursday.

If the virus is confirmed at the farms in

TIRANA, May 1, (AFP): Drita, 31, covers her face with trembling hands. She just learned that after giving birth to three daughters in four years she is pregnant again with a girl, an unforgivable crime in the patriarchal Balkans that clearly prefers boys.

She tries to mutter a few words, but her mother-in-law, Sanije, silences her with a hard stare.

"A fourth one is a curse... either she will abort or there is no place for her with us," she says, handing a bundle of bank notes to a doctor at a private clinic in downtown Tirana.

Selective abortions are common practice in Albania and some other Balkan countries where an imbalance between boys and girls at birth is blamed on a preference for boys.

"Prenatal sex selection continues to be a persistent practice in Albania although the legislation specifically bans it," said Rubena Moisiu, head of an obstetrics hospital in Tirana.

It gradually leads to a demographic masculinisation of society, already visible among young children.

In countries such as Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and in western Macedonia there some 110 male per 100 female births," Christophe Guillemot of the French Research Institute for Development, who specialises in gender imbalances, told AFP.

This figure is higher than the aver-

age biological sex ratio at birth of 105 boys to 100 girls. And the regularity of the 110-100 ratio over the years attests to the imbalance.

According to the national statistics bureau, on Jan 1 there were 31,000 fewer women than men in Albania's population of 2.8 million.

Albania is among the few European countries where men outnumber women, and this despite a very strong emigration for economic reasons over the past two decades, mainly by men.

Balkans missing girls

Prenatal selection upset sex ratio

Such a trend exists also in Montenegro, a traditional society where (prenatal) sex selection is a common practise," says Maja Raicevic of the Women's Rights Centre in Podgorica.

"In recent years for every 8,000 births there were about 800 more boys than girls, an imbalance that is far from normal," said Olivera Miljanovic, head of the National Medical Genetics Center.

As a result, Montenegro lacks some 3,000 women of reproductive age, she said.

In the Balkans "boys are more desired than girls," explained anthropologist Aferdita Onuzi from Tirana. "Women are under strong pressure to give birth to a male successor at any price."

In Kosovo, Montenegro, but also in some Macedonian regions, tradi-

tional thinking that favours boys over girls is said to be the main cause of this phenomenon.

Experts stress that a woman is perceived only as a "burden" and a man as a "pillar of the family".

Abortion in the Balkans region is legal until the 10th or in some cases 12th week of pregnancy, before a baby's sex can be determined.

To circumvent the law, however, many selective abortions are carried out in private clinics or even by individuals who are not authorised to perform such a medical procedure.

"Although there have been cases when women died, everyone remains silent, fearing repercussions. A lot of money is at stake," said Fetije Kipuska a Pristina gynaecologist.

In Montenegro, many women prefer to go to hospitals in neighbouring countries to determine the baby's sex before abortion.

"I know a woman who aborted twice under pressure from her husband's family after learning she was pregnant with girls.

Eventually, she gave birth to a boy," Milica, a professor in Podgorica who did not want to give her family name, told AFP.

"The missing women, eliminated before birth because of their gender, weigh heavily on the society and economy of all the countries concerned," said Elsona Agolli, a gender issue expert with the United Nations Population Fund in Tirana.

Anderson

Ostroff

firmed the outbreak but disputed the number of birds affected. The state did not identify the affected farm by name.

"Rembrandt Foods takes biosecurity and food safety very seriously. Our focus over the past several weeks has been to diligently implement enhanced biosecurity procedures," the company said in a statement.

"Notwithstanding our best efforts, one of our barns at the Rembrandt, Iowa, complex has become the latest... to test presumptive positive for avian influenza." (RTS)

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