

Health

End of Pap era?

'Age matters' for cervical cancer screening: experts

WASHINGTON, Sept 13, (Agencies): Getting checked for cervical cancer isn't one-size-fits-all: Millions of women may soon have to decide between a routine Pap or a newer test that detects if they have a cancer-causing virus.

Draft national guidelines released Tuesday for the first time say either option is reasonable for certain women — those ages 30 to 65.

Paps, a mainstay for women's health for decades, can spot precancerous abnormalities in time to prevent cancer. Newer HPV tests detect the virus that causes nearly all of that cancer, and while they're widely used to confirm Pap results, most US medical groups haven't yet pushed them as a stand-alone alternative for screening.

Tuesday's proposal doesn't signal an imminent end to the Pap era. Paps, not HPV tests, still are recommended for screening women in their 20s, stressed the guidelines from the US Preventive Services Task Force.

And don't let the which-test debate blur the main message: "Screening for cervical cancer saves lives", said Task Force member Dr Carol Mangione of the University of California, Los Angeles.

Today, too many women still miss out. Some things to know:

Cervical cancer still a threat

Cervical cancer has dropped dramatically over the past half-century thanks to Pap testing. Still, this year an estimated 12,820 US women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer, and about 4,200 will die. Most haven't been screened, or have gone too long between checks.

Paps examine cells scraped from the cervix. HPV testing looks for high-risk strains of the human papillomavirus, the nation's most common sexually transmitted infection. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just about everyone will get at least one strain at some point in their lives. But only certain strains cause cervical cancer — and only if they linger long enough in the body.

Age matters for screening

Otherwise healthy women need a Pap every three years from age 21 to 29, agree most US physician groups and the draft Task Force guidelines. Cervical cancer grows so slowly that regular Paps can find a problem early enough to treat.

While the Food and Drug Administration has approved an HPV test for women as young as 25, national guidelines have long recommended Pap screening for 20-somethings. That age group

is most likely to get HPV — and the vast majority of the time their bodies clear the infection before it harms.

What changes at age 30?

The older you get, the greater the chance that an HPV infection is the yearslong, harmful kind. To better catch those cases, today what's called co-testing is increasingly common for women 30 and over — a Pap-plus-HPV test combination. If the results of both tests are negative, women can wait five years to test again.

But both Paps and HPV testing can trigger false alarms, prompting unnecessary, and sometimes harmful, additional care to rule out cancer. New studies show co-testing leads to more false alarms than either test alone, without adding benefit.

That spurred Tuesday's Task Force proposal to let women 30 and over choose an HPV test by itself every five years — or a Pap every three years instead. The proposal is open for public comment through Oct. 9, before it will be finalized.

Some countries already are moving to make HPV testing the chief screening tool, including the Netherlands and Australia.

"Most experts in this area are in agreement that HPV testing alone is the future of cervical screening", said Debbie Saslow of the American Cancer Society, who wasn't involved with Tuesday's draft guidelines.

Weigh pros and cons

Women in their 30s and older need to discuss screening options with their health providers, said Dr Jason Wright, gynecologic oncology chief at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center, who also wasn't involved with the new guidelines.

An HPV test can cost twice as much as a \$40 Pap, but doesn't require screening as often. Some data suggest HPV testing leads to more diagnosis of risky pre-cancer — but even by itself, an HPV test can spark more false alarms than a Pap, Wright said.

Also, some follow-up tests can alter the cervix in ways that may affect future pregnancies, a consideration for women still interested in childbearing, added the Task Force's Mangione.

Who can skip cervical cancer screening?

It's not recommended for women younger than 21, or those who had a cervix-removing hysterectomy.

Women can stop screening after age 65 if proper checks until then show they're healthy, current guidelines agree.



This photo taken on Sept 10, shows people taking part in the Sparta Race, a race through an obstacle course, in Qingdao in China's eastern Shandong province. (AFP)

Tattoo ink can seep deep into the body: study

'Hormone pills don't shorten older women's lives'

CHICAGO, Sept 13, (Agencies): Taking hormone pills for several years after menopause didn't shorten older women's lifespans, according to the longest follow-up yet of landmark research that transformed thinking on risks and benefits of a once popular treatment.

That research was halted early when unexpected harms were found from using replacement hormones — estrogen alone or with progesterin — versus dummy pills for five to seven years. More breast cancer, heart attacks and strokes occurred in women on combined pills, and those on estrogen pills had more strokes.

But about 18 years of follow-up show that despite those risks, women had similar rates of deaths from heart disease, breast cancer and all other causes as those who took dummy pills.

The new results are reassuring and support current advice: Hormones may be appropriate for some women when used short-term to relieve hot flashes and other bothersome menopause symptoms, said Dr JoAnn Manson, preventive medicine chief at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital and lead author of the follow-up report.

"It's the ultimate bottom line", said Manson, who was also part of the original research. Women want to know "is this medication going to kill me" and the answer appears to be no, she said.

Results were published Tuesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Hormones were once considered a

fountain of youth for women entering menopause because of weak evidence suggesting a host of purported benefits including reducing heart disease and boosting memory. The landmark research, backed by the US government, began in the early 1990s to rigorously test hormones' effects in older women randomly assigned to take the pills or dummy treatment. Brands studied were Prempro estrogen-progesterin pills and Premarin estrogen-only pills.

Symptoms

The results led to advice against taking hormones to prevent age-related diseases. When used for menopause symptoms, the lowest possible dose for the shortest possible time was recommended, then as now. For some women already facing health risks, hormones' potential harms may outweigh any benefits, and discussions with a doctor about starting the treatment are advised.

Participants were aged 50 to 79 and past menopause, older than typical users, and took larger doses than currently recommended.

The follow-up involved most of the more than 27,000 women who were part of the original research. It included time using pills and about 10 or so years after stopping. Some earlier follow-ups suggested no increased risk of death in hormone users, but Manson said this is the first to focus only on deaths from various causes.

Overall, almost 7,500 women died — about 27 percent each in the hor-

mone and dummy pill groups. Most deaths occurred after women stopped taking hormones. About 9 percent of women in both groups died from heart disease and about 8 percent from breast and other cancers.

Among the youngest women, there were fewer overall deaths early on among hormone users than dummy-pill users, but the rates evened out after women stopped using the pills.

Overall, death rates were similar among women on both types of hormone treatment versus dummy pills.

Prempro and Premarin are both approved to treat menopause symptoms and to prevent bone-thinning osteoporosis. Even so, many women and their doctors remain wary of hormone use. An editorial published with the follow-up study says the results "will hopefully alleviate concerns" about the long-term consequences.

More research is needed on risks and benefits of other types of hormones including patches, Manson said.

Microscopic particles from tattoo ink can migrate into the body and wind up in lymph nodes, crucial hubs of the human immune system, a study revealed Tuesday.

The tiny particles — measuring a few millionths to a few billionths of a centimetre — include molecules from preservatives and contaminants such as nickel, chromium, manganese and cobalt, researchers reported in the peer-reviewed journal Scientific Reports.

Tattoo colouring is composed of various organic and inorganic pigments, and can be contaminated with toxic impurities.

Besides carbon black, the second most common ingredient used in tattoo inks is titanium dioxide, a white pigment also used in food additives, sun screens and paints.

Healing

The chemical has been associated with delayed healing, itching and skin irritation.

"When someone wants to get a tattoo, they are often very careful in choosing a parlour where they use sterile needles", said co-author Hiram Castillo, a researcher at the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in Grenoble, France.

"No one checks the chemical composition of the colours, but our study shows that maybe they should".

Scientists in Grenoble, joined by colleagues at the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment in Berlin, used X-ray fluorescence measurements to identify particles in the skin and the lymph nodes, which are located in the neck, under the arms and along the crease between the thighs and the abdomen.

Only the tiniest, nano-scale particles made it into the lymph nodes.

The researchers also used a technique called Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy to assess changes in tissue near tattoo particles at the molecular level.

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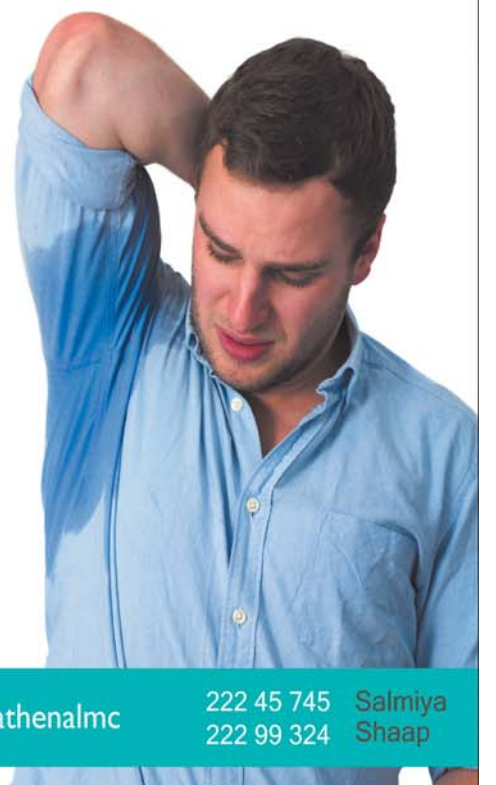
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