

New test could replace Pap smear

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NEW YORK -- A relatively new screening test was about twice as accurate as the traditional Pap smear at spotting cervical cancer, according to the first rigorous study of the test in North America.

The new test could replace the 50-year-old Pap in a matter of years, experts say. And there's a bonus for women: They won't need a screening test as often.

The HPV test, which looks for the virus that causes cervical cancer, correctly spotted 95 percent of the cancers. The Pap test, which checks for abnormal cells under a microscope, only found 55 percent, according to researchers at McGill University in Montreal, who published their findings in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine.

"We've had the Pap test for over 50 years and it's high time it be replaced by technology that's more robust," said Eduardo Franco, director of McGill's division of cancer epidemiology, who led the study.

Franco said some feared the HPV test would result in more false alarms, causing anxiety and requiring more follow-up testing. In the study, there were only slightly more false positives for the HPV tests (6 percent) than the Pap smears (3 percent).

HPV, or human papilloma virus, is a common sexually transmitted disease. Infections are mostly in young women and most go away on their own. The HPV test looks for the high-risk viruses that can cause cervical cancer if the infection persists. Like the Pap, it uses cells scraped from the cervix.

Because the Pap test misses about half of the cases, doctors use frequent testing to catch the slow-developing cancer early.

The HPV test has been available in the U.S. since 2000 and was first used for inconclusive Pap tests. Now, women older than 30 can get a HPV test -- but only along with a Pap -- and wait three years to be tested again if both tests are negative.

More recently, scientists have been studying whether the HPV test can be used alone and whether it can prolong the intervals between exams. Debbie Saslow, director of breast and gynecologic cancer for the American Cancer Society, said evidence from a number of studies supports using the HPV test in place of a Pap.

The Canadian study, which was government-funded, included 10,154 women ages 30 to 69. The women got both tests. Still to be determined is the best way to start using the HPV test by itself.

The human papilloma virus test detected
95 percent of cervical cancers in a new study.