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SA's women with HIV face three times higher risk of cervical cancer, study finds

New research has found that women with HIV in South Africa face a three times higher risk of cervical cancer than those who do not live with HIV.

Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer among women worldwide, but women in sub-Saharan Africa are disproportionately affected by this disease. In South Africa, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer, with about 11 000 new cases every year and the most frequent cause of cancer-related death among women.

Researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of Bern in Switzerland assessed cervical precancer and cervical cancer incidence among more than half a million women with and without HIV. They used reimbursement claims data from a private medical insurance scheme in South Africa between January 2011 and June 2020. Of the 517 312 women, 564 developed cervical cancer.

The team behind the research found that women with HIV had an approximately three times higher risk of developing cervical precancer and cervical cancer than women without HIV. "More frequent cervical cancer screening is recommended for women with HIV," said co-author of the study and head of UCT's Division of Clinical Pharmacology, Professor Gary Maartens.

The research, published in the [*International Journal of Cancer*](#), found that the biggest relative impact of HIV on cervical cancer risk was among young women, but in absolute terms, middle-aged women bore the highest cervical cancer burden.

"The results underscore the significance of early detection and treatment of cervical lesions in preventing cervical cancer, especially among women with HIV," said Dr Eliane Rohner, co-author of the study and head of the cancer research group at the University of Bern.

Cervical cancer risk was highest in older women (65 years and above), whereas cervical precancer most commonly occurred among women in their mid-20s to mid-40s. Other risk factors for cervical precancer and cervical cancer included a history of genital warts and other sexually transmitted infections.

"To effectively fight cervical cancer in South Africa and other countries where both HIV and cervical cancer are a big problem, it is crucial to study how cervical precancer and cervical

cancer rates vary by age and HIV status. This information will help us create better and more focused strategies for preventing cervical cancer," Rohner concluded.

ENDS

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