Cervicovaginal Self-Sampling Is a Reliable Method for Determination of Prevalence of Human Papillomavirus Genotypes in Women Aged 20 to 30 Years\textsuperscript{V}

Yvonne Delere\textsuperscript{1,*} Melanie Schuster,\textsuperscript{1} Elena Vartazarowa,\textsuperscript{2} Thomas Hänsel,\textsuperscript{1} Inge Hagemann,\textsuperscript{3} Simone Borchardt,\textsuperscript{4} Heike Perlitz,\textsuperscript{5} Achim Schneider,\textsuperscript{2} Sabine Reiter,\textsuperscript{1} and Andreas M. Kaufmann\textsuperscript{2}

Robert Koch Institute, Immunization Unit, DGZ-Ring 1, 13086 Berlin, Germany;\textsuperscript{1} Charité-Universitätsmedizin Berlin, CBF/CCM, Clinic for Gynecology, Hindenburgdamm 30, 12203 Berlin, Germany;\textsuperscript{2} Gynecological Practice abts+partner, Eckernförde Str. 219, 24119 Kronshagen, Germany;\textsuperscript{3} Gynecological Practice, Turnstraße 46, 10551 Berlin, Germany;\textsuperscript{4} and Gynecological Practice, Bahnhofstraße 7-9, 39340 Haldensleben, Germany\textsuperscript{5}

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Self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage could be an attractive method to detect high-risk human papillomavirus (hr-HPV) infections to identify women with a risk of cervical precancer. The objective of our study was to use self-sampling for the first time in a cross-sectional approach to determine HPV prevalence and genotype distribution. We evaluated participants’ acceptance and laboratory results from self-obtained samples versus endocervical brush samples obtained by gynecologists. To determine the sensitivity of both sampling methods in presumed high- and low-prevalence settings, two groups of women 20 to 30 years of age with \((n = 55)\) and without \((n = 101)\) a recent suspicious cytological smear were compared. Overall, 76% (95% confidence interval [95% CI], 65 to 88) of women without a recent suspicious cytological smear tested HPV positive. The prevalences of high-risk HPV strains were 71% (95% CI, 59 to 83) and 32% (95% CI, 22 to 41), respectively, for these two groups. The agreement for hr-HPV between the two sampling methods for women with and without suspicious cytology was 84% (\(\kappa = 0.65; 95\%\ CI, 0.44\) to 0.86) and 91% (\(\kappa = 0.78; 95\%\ CI, 0.64\) to 0.92), respectively. Participants rated the user-friendliness of the self-sampling method on a visual analog scale from 0 (easy) to 100 (difficult) with a median of 12. In conclusion, self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage is a reliable method to determine hr-HPV prevalence and is well accepted by young adult females.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women worldwide, with globally approximately 500,000 new cases and 250,000 deaths each year (http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/cancers/en/). The strong correlation between cervical cancer and a preceding persistent infection of the cervix with human papillomavirus (HPV) is beyond dispute (2, 18). More than 130 genotypes of HPV have been classified (6), of which about 40 genotypes can infect the anogenital tract (14). Of these 40 genotypes, nearly 20 are thought to be carcinogenic and are classified as high-risk HPV (hr-HPV). Genotypes 16 and 18 alone are associated with approximately 50% of high-grade cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) and 70% of cervical cancers (4, 20). Anogenital HPV infections are predominantly sexually transmitted, and nearly all sexually active women will be infected at some point during their lifetime (1). Most HPV infections are transient, but persistent infections can progress over years to high-grade CIN or cervical cancer.

Vaccines against HPV genotypes 16 and 18 have been available since 2006. Results from clinical trials indicate high effectiveness against high-grade CIN when HPV-naïve girls and women are vaccinated (7, 16, 17). Numerous industrial countries have implemented vaccination programs to protect girls against infections with HPV types 16 and 18. Target groups for the vaccination are mainly adolescent women preceding their sexual debut. To monitor the impact of the vaccine and the implemented vaccination strategy, it is essential to assess HPV prevalence and type distribution before and after implementation. Population-level studies are mainly based on analysis of cytological samples obtained from opportunistic or organized cervical cancer screening (12, 13). Such prevalence estimates are prone to bias if participation in screening programs is low. To access women in countries with low screening participation or without organized screening programs, alternative approaches are needed to determine HPV prevalence and genotype distribution.

Self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage has been shown to be useful in previous studies to detect high-grade CIN (3, 8, 21) and was highly accepted in the Netherlands (11). The objective of our study was to evaluate if self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage is a useful and valid approach to determine HPV prevalence and genotype distribution.

Study population. Women aged 20 to 30 years who made an appointment for follow-up examination due to abnormal cytological smears or for routine cervical cancer screening were recruited between April 2009 and January 2010. The aim of the study was to enroll 50 women with a recent abnormal cytological smear in a presumed high-prevalence group and 100 women without a history of abnormal

\* Corresponding author. Mailing address: Immunization Unit, Department for Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Robert Koch Institute, DGZ-Ring 1, 13086 Berlin, Germany. Phone: 49 30 187543410. Fax: 49 30 187543514. E-mail: delerey@rki.de.

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RESULTS

HPV genotyping. HPV prevalence of any type was highest in
women of the high-prevalence group with 76% (95% CI, 65 to 88) (Fig. 2). Among the group of women in the low- or aver-
age-prevalence group, a total of 40% (95% CI, 30 to 49) was
infected with HPV of any type. The prevalences of hr-HPV
differed between the groups, with 71% (95% CI, 59 to 83) in
the high-prevalence group and 32% (95% CI, 22 to 41) in the
low-prevalence group. HPV16 infections were found in 40%
(95% CI, 27 to 53) of women in the high-prevalence group and
in 19% (95% CI, 11 to 27) of women in the low- or average-
prevalence group. Infections with HPV16 only were the most
prevalent infections among women with single-HPV-type de-
tection (n = 21). Identical results for single infections by HPV16 in both samples (self-obtained versus gynecologist-obtained) were found in 16 of 82 HPV-positive women (20%; 95% CI, 12 to 30). In 3 endocervical brush samples versus 2 cervicovaginal lavage samples, HPV16 was found exclusively. Multiple infections with two or more HPV types were observed in 30 of 82 HPV-positive women (37%; 95% CI, 26 to 48). 

Overall, 43 of 82 (52%; 95% CI, 41 to 64) positive results were absolutely identical in both sample types, 17 (21%; 95% CI, 13 to 31) were partly identical, and 22 (27%; 95% CI, 18 to 38) did not match.

Concordance of sampling methods. The agreement between sampling methods (Table 1) in the group of women in the presumed high-prevalence group for any type of HPV and hr-HPV was 84% either, resulting in kappa statistics (κ) of 0.62 (95% CI, 0.40 to 0.85) and 0.65 (95% CI, 0.44 to 0.86). The agreement for HPV16 in the same group was 93% with κ of 0.84 (95% CI, 0.70 to 0.99). In the group of women in the low- or average-prevalence group, the agreement was 87% for any HPV type, 91% for hr-HPV, and 94% for HPV16, resulting in κ of 0.71 (95% CI, 0.57 to 0.86) and 0.78 for hr-HPV (95% CI, 0.64 to 0.92) and HPV 16 (95% CI, 0.61 to 0.95), respectively.

In the high-prevalence group of women with suspicious cytological findings, gynecologist-obtained cervical brush sampling resulted in a sensitivity for the detection of hr-HPV of 87% (34/39; 95% CI, 76 to 97) versus 90% (35/39; 95% CI, 76 to 97) for self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage. Sensitivity for the detection of hr-HPV in the low- or average-prevalence group was 84% (27/32; 95% CI, 67 to 95) for gynecologist-obtained cervical brush samples and 88% (28/32; 95% CI, 71 to 97) for self-obtained cervicovaginal lavage samples.

Acceptance of self-sampling. In order to investigate the acceptability of using the self-sampling cervicovaginal lavage method, we evaluated via visual analog data by using a 100-mm scale between 0 (easy) and 100 (difficult or displeasing) for user-friendliness and sensation of the intravaginal application. The participants in the presumed high-prevalence group (n = 54) as well as the participants in the low- or average-prevalence group (n = 99) rated the method as generally easy to use (high-prevalence group: median = 11; interquartile range [IQR], 2 to 25; low- or average-prevalence group: median = 13, IQR, 4 to 25). Participants of both groups voted generally fine for sensation (high-prevalence group: median = 20; IQR, 7 to 40; low- or average-prevalence group: median = 25; IQR, 8 to 40). If the women were offered a choice between collection of the sample by a gynecologist and use of the self-sampling device for HPV testing, 44% (n = 24) of women with a history of abnormal smears and 35% (n = 35) of women without such a history would prefer self-sampling. No preference was held by 11% in the high-prevalence group and 12% in the low- or average-prevalence group.

**DISCUSSION**

Our results show that self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage is a reliable method to determine HPV prevalence in women aged 20 to 30 years. Analysis of self-sampled cervicovaginal lavage specimens resulted in comparable numbers of hr-HPV detection and showed similar sensitivity compared to gynecologist-taken samples. These results are in line with previous studies that compared self- and clinician-collected specimens to identify women with a risk of high-grade CIN and cervical precancer (3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 15). In our study, the self-sampling method was used for the first time in a cross-sectional approach to determine HPV prevalence and genotyping and not to determine a clinical outcome. This extends possible applications of the self-sampling method to the field of epidemiology (HPV monitoring) and highlights the public health relevance of this method.

Although the mailing time is not documented for all samples in our study, the high concordance of results between self-obtained and gynecologist-obtained samples suggests that possible different mailing times will not result in statistical differences.

The concordance is good even though the sampled areas differ: the colposcopy-directed endocervical brush sample for

![FIG. 2. Overall prevalence of HPV (brush and lavage results) in study subgroups.](image-url)
HPV testing focuses on transformation zone cells, while the cervicovaginal lavage includes the whole cervical area. The higher prevalence of HPV, hr-HPV, and HPV16 in cervicovaginal lavage samples may be explained by additional infections at extracervical sites. Since these infections may be a reservoir for virus infecting the cervical epithelium at the transformation zone, they are probably epidemiologically relevant. Therefore, cervicovaginal lavage sampling may be superior to cervix-directed sampling for future HPV prevalence studies.

The prevalence of hr-HPV in our study population of women aged 20 to 30 years was high, with 71% in the group of women with abnormal cytological findings and 32% in women attending routine screening. Even though our sample size is small, these prevalences are comparable to findings of HPV positivity in Denmark (12) with hr-HPV prevalence of 45% (95% CI, 43 to 47) in women 20 to 24 years of age. Still, our study population can be regarded as a convenience sample including a considerable proportion of women with previous suspicious cytological findings. Therefore, a study is planned to assess HPV prevalence in the general female population in Germany to monitor the impact of HPV vaccination.

The acceptance of self-sampling in 20- to 30-year-old females is high. Even if half of the participants of our study would prefer to visit a gynecologist than to use a self-sampling device at home, nearly all women declared that the device was easy to use. The participants of our study had already made an appointment for screening before enrolling, so it is not surprising that they have no barrier to going to a gynecologist. Thus, using self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage could provide safe and low-barrier access to young women.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, self-sampling by cervicovaginal lavage has a broad variety of applications. The easy-to-handle device with its excellent user acceptance, high sensitivity in detecting hr-HPV, robustness against environmental influences, and low-barrier access to young women.

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