Do some women with CIN 3 test negative for high-risk HPV?

**YES** In this analysis from the atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS) and low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (LSIL) Triage Study (ALTS), 33 of 621 women who had a diagnosis of cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) 3 at baseline also tested negative for high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) DNA.


**EXPERT COMMENTARY**

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When it comes to cervical cancer prevention, screening and diagnostic tests have limits to their accuracy. Cancer-prevention strategies work because we assess patients over time and because we accept a small number of false positives as necessary to minimize the loss of sensitivity; in that way, we also minimize cancer-related morbidity.¹

**Link between high-risk HPV and cancer is a given**

Cervical cancer is invariably linked to high-risk HPV. Women who are not truly infected with high-risk HPV are believed to have no risk for cervical cancer.² Assay-based endpoints such as HPV DNA testing have good accuracy indices, whereas cytologic and histologic endpoints are subject to greater human error.

A CIN 3 lesion should never occur in a woman who is negative for high-risk HPV DNA. When the combination is found, which is rare, one of two mechanisms is involved:

- a falsely negative HPV test
- a falsely positive diagnosis of CIN 3.

When HPV testing is falsely negative, it is usually due to 1) the cutoffs used for HPV detection or 2) the sampling technique. A diagnosis of CIN 3 may be falsely positive when benign atypical changes or lesser-grade CIN is overinterpreted. Other explanations include rapidly progressive CIN 3 when a new high-risk HPV infection occurs after the index HPV test, and CIN 3 that will not progress to cancer because it stems from a noncarcinogenic HPV type or an HPV type not recognized by the test.²³

**In ALTS, falsely positive histology was probably to blame**

The CIN 3 detected in women who tested negative for high-risk HPV DNA (i.e., after borderline cytology rather than because of a high-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion [HSIL]) was probably associated with falsely positive histology rather than falsely negative HPV testing.

CIN 3 in women who tested negative for high-risk HPV DNA was more likely to be:

- diagnosed at exit
- from a center where CIN 3 diagnoses
were not confirmed by the Pathology Quality Control Group and less likely to be:

- associated with a referral Pap test classified as LSIL than as ASCUS
- associated with an enrollment Pap test classified as HSIL
- symptomatic
- associated with high-grade Cervigrams.

These women also were likely to test negative for HPV DNA using Linear Array.

These findings suggest that some cases of CIN 3 were based on histologic overcall.

In reviewing cases of CIN 3 in the 33 women who tested negative for high-risk HPV DNA, investigators found only 8 cases attributable to falsely-negative HPV testing, whereas 12 were related to incident HPV infection. Eight cases were caused by histologic overcall; 5 represented non–high-risk HPV that was unlikely to progress to cancer.

References