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Press release

For immediate publication

**The future of cancer therapy for cervical and vulvar cancer:
Individualization of treatment and alternatives to surgery**

Graz, 5 May 2022: While treatment options for cancer are becoming more diverse and many tumors can be found in a very early stage thanks to better screening, a diagnosis of cancer still comes as a shock for many people. Cancer does not always come into being "at once" but in some cases develops from preliminary "precancerous" stages. In gynecology, the focus is on cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) and vulvar intraepithelial neoplasia (VIN). A new study by Med Uni Graz researchers under the direction of Gerda Trutnovsky that recently appeared in the renowned journal "The Lancet" takes a close look at the treatment of these precancerous lesions.

HPV as a risk factor

High-grade intraepithelial neoplasia (HGIN) are triggered by infection with human papillomavirus (HPV). Although a vaccine against the cancer-causing pathogen is available, the vaccination rate is unfortunately very low, and the incidence of CIN and VIN in the population has increased in recent years—above all in younger women.

Surgery as the only way out?

If the lesions and neoplasia are detected early enough—before precancerous growths have actually become cancer—quick intervention can prevent serious illness. Surgery and surgical removal are the current go-to solutions for HGIN that affects the vulva and cervix. "However, surgery also has drawbacks: Surgical removal of VIN can cause wound healing disorders, scarring and even sexual complaints later on. Recurrences—a new occurrence of the disease—are frequent, and often several operations are necessary," explains Gerda Trutnovsky, mentioning reasons to avoid surgical options.

Exploiting the immune system

The immune system usually recognizes defective and proliferating cells on its own and rapidly destroys them. It becomes dangerous when the cancerous cells are able to elude this mechanism. A little boost to the immune system can have a large impact on precancerous growths on the vulva and cervix. Imiquimod is the name of the drug that can induce the immune system to destroy the sick cells. Women can apply this cream to the affected areas by themselves. The drug causes a local inflammation so that the lesions are destroyed by the immune system without any surgical intervention. In many cases, the lesions may disappear completely.

PITVIN study

In the study that appeared in the Lancet, 110 women in Austria with VIN either received surgical therapy or were treated with the Imiquimod cream, and the results from both groups were compared. "It appeared that the Imiquimod cream was effective and well tolerated, and the rate of success of this treatment equaled that of surgery," explains Gerda Trutnovsky.

Weighing options and making the right decision

Treatment with Imiquimod is a new therapy option for women who want to avoid the disadvantages of surgical therapy. It is important that the cream is used regularly, 2 to 3 times per week, and that checkups occur. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of all options leads to better, safer and more successful treatment of precancerous lesions and greater prevention of cancer.

Further information and contact

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Profile: Gerda Trutnovsky

Gerda Trutnovsky studied medicine in Graz and Sydney and then completed her residency in gynecology and obstetrics in Graz. In 2014 she finished her habilitation and has been an associate professor at the Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics since 2017. She has been deputy head of the Division of Gynaecology since 2021.

Link to the study: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014067362200469X>