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Case-control study of human papillomavirus and oropharyngeal cancer.

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BACKGROUND: Substantial molecular evidence suggests a role for human papillomavirus (HPV) in the pathogenesis of oropharyngeal squamous-cell carcinoma, but epidemiologic data have been inconsistent.

METHODS: We performed a hospital-based, case-control study of 100 patients with newly diagnosed oropharyngeal cancer and 200 control patients without cancer to evaluate associations between HPV infection and oropharyngeal cancer. Multivariate logistic-regression models were used for case-control comparisons.

RESULTS: A high lifetime number of vaginal-sex partners (26 or more) was associated with oropharyngeal cancer (odds ratio, 3.1; 95% confidence interval [CI], 1.5 to 6.5), as was a high lifetime number of oral-sex partners (6 or more) (odds ratio, 3.4; 95% CI, 1.3 to 8.8). The degree of association increased with the number of vaginal-sex and oral-sex partners (P values for trend, 0.002 and 0.009, respectively). Oropharyngeal cancer was significantly associated with oral HPV type 16 (HPV-16) infection (odds ratio, 14.6; 95% CI, 6.3 to 36.6), oral infection with any of 37 types of HPV (odds ratio, 12.3; 95% CI, 5.4 to 26.4), and seropositivity for the HPV-16 L1 capsid protein (odds ratio, 32.2; 95% CI, 14.6 to 71.3). HPV-16 DNA was detected in 72% (95% CI, 62 to 81) of 100 paraffin-embedded tumor specimens, and 64% of patients with cancer were seropositive for the HPV-16 oncoprotein E6, E7, or both. HPV-16 L1 seropositivity was highly associated with oropharyngeal cancer among subjects with a history of heavy tobacco and alcohol use (odds ratio, 19.4; 95% CI, 3.3 to 113.9) and among those without such a history (odds ratio, 33.6; 95% CI, 13.3 to 84.8). The association was similarly increased among subjects with oral HPV-16 infection, regardless of their tobacco and alcohol use. By contrast, tobacco and alcohol use increased the association with oropharyngeal cancer primarily among subjects without exposure to HPV-16.

CONCLUSIONS: Oral HPV infection is strongly associated with oropharyngeal cancer among subjects with or without the established risk factors of tobacco and alcohol use.

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