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Authors
Massad, Leslie S
Xie, Xianhong
Minkoff, Howard
et al.

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Longitudinal assessment of abnormal Papanicolaou test rates among women with HIV

Leslie S. Massad[a], Xianhong Xie[b], Howard Minkoff[c], Seble Kassaye[d], Roksana Karim[e], Teresa M. Darragh[f], Elizabeth T. Golub[g], Adaora Adimora[h], Gina Wingood[i], Margaret Fischl[j], Deborah Konkle-Parker[k] and Howard D. Strickler[b]

Objective: To describe longitudinal changes in the prevalence of abnormal Papanicolau testing among women living with HIV.

Design: Prospective cohort study with sequential enrollment subcohorts.

Methods: Four waves of enrollment occurred in the Women's Interagency HIV Study, the US women's HIV cohort (1994–1995, 2001–2002, 2011–2012, 2013–2015). Pap testing was done at intake, with colposcopy prescribed for any abnormality. Rates of abnormal Pap test results (atypical squamous cells of uncertain significance or worse) and cervical intraepithelial neoplasia grade 2 (CIN2) or worse were calculated. Logistic regression models assessed changes in prevalence across cohorts after controlling for severity of HIV disease and other risk factors for abnormal Pap tests.

Results: The unadjusted prevalence of any Pap abnormality was 679/1769 (38%) in the original cohort, 195/684 (29%) in the 2001–2002 cohort, 46/231 (20%) in the 2011–2012 cohort, and 71/449 (16%) in the 2013–2015 cohort. In multivariable analysis, compared with risk in the 1994–1995 cohort, the adjusted risk in the 2001–2002 cohort was 0.79 (95% CI 0.59–1.05), in the 2011–2012 cohort was 0.67 (95% CI 0.43–1.04), and in the 2013–2015 cohort was 0.41 (95% CI 0.27–0.62) with *P* for trend less than 0.0001.

Conclusion: Rates of abnormal cytology among women with HIV have fallen during the past two decades.

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Keywords: HIV infection in women, Papanicolaou test, Women's Interagency HIV Study

Introduction

For women, infection with the (HIV)-1 increases risk for opportunistic infection with genital human papillomaviruses (HPVs), including carcinogenic HPV types [1]. These infections are often manifested morphologically and detected clinically through Papanicolaou testing. As women with HIV face high cervical cancer risk, it is recommended that they undergo more intensive screening than women without HIV infection. Behavioral

[a]Division of Gynecologic Oncology, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, Missouri, [b]Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, [c]Maimonides Medical Center, Brooklyn, New York, [d]Georgetown University School of Medicine, Washington, DC, [e]University of Southern California, Los Angeles, [f]University of California, San Francisco, California, [g]Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, [h]University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, [i]Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, New York, [j]University of Miami, Miami, Florida, and [k]University of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, USA.

Correspondence to Leslie S. Massad, Division of Gynecologic Oncology, Washington University School of Medicine, Box 8064-37-905, St. Louis, MO 63110, USA.

Tel: +1 314 362 3181; fax: +1 314 362 2893; e-mail: massadl@wustl.edu
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factors common among women with HIV, including multiple sexual partners and smoking, also increase their risk for abnormal Pap test results.

Initial studies that defined the relationships among HIV infection, HPV infection, abnormal cytology, and cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) were published soon after the HIV epidemic in developed countries crossed from homosexual and intravenous drug-using populations into heterosexual populations [1]. However, many of these foundational studies antedate the introduction of combination antiretroviral therapy (cART) more than 20 years ago. Among other profound changes, cART influences the natural history of HPV-related cervical disease. It decreases prevalence and incidence and increases rates of regression of HPV, oncogenic HPV, and cervical squamous lesions [2–6]. This impact is preferentially seen in women with more than 95% adherence to cART [3]. As high-grade cervical lesions have been identified and treated and as women have initiated cART, incident abnormal cytology rates have fallen [7].

Over the past quarter century, cervical cancer incidence in the United States has fallen from 10.5 cases/100 000 women in 1994 to 6.8/100 000 in 2015 [8]. The demographic profile of HIV infection in the United States also has changed, and the US epidemic increasingly affects minority women in Southern states [9]. How these trends might have impacted the prevalence of abnormal Pap tests among women with HIV is unclear.

The Women's Interagency HIV Study (WIHS) is the US national cohort study of women with HIV. Launched in 1994, the study has included waves of expansion to remain representative of the experience of US women with HIV. The study now incorporates women enrolled prior to introduction of cART as well as during periods with differing guidelines for cART, beginning with targeted cART prescription for women with more severe disease as measured by lower $CD4^+$ lymphocyte counts, and more recently expanded to routine cART prescription for all women with HIV. The effectiveness and tolerability of cART has also improved over time.

We set out to assess changes across time in the prevalence of abnormal Pap tests among women recruited to the WIHS and to assess the impact of cART and other risk factors for Pap abnormalities.

Methods

This investigation was part of the WIHS, the ongoing US multicenter prospective cohort investigation of HIV infection and related health conditions among HIV seropositive women and demographically similar seronegative comparison women. The protocols, recruitment processes, procedures, and baseline results of the WIHS have been described [10–12]. Enrollment began prior to the widespread introduction of cART with 2623 women (2056 with HIV and 569 without) in 1994–1995 at six study consortia (Bronx, Brooklyn, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, DC). The cohort was expanded by an additional 1141 women (738 with HIV and 403 without) during 2001–2002, when cART was initiated by indication [10]. The WIHS was augmented in 2011–2012 by 371 additional women (276 with HIV and 95 without) and most recently by 844 women (610 with HIV and 234 without) in 2013–2015. As of late 2016, 1268 women had died, 130 had withdrawn from study, 806 had been discontinued for administrative/funding reasons, 415 had been lost to follow-up, and 2363 were being actively followed.

Local human subject committees approved study protocols, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. HIV serostatus was determined by ELISA with confirmatory testing at study entry for all participants and semiannually thereafter for those initially seronegative. Follow-up continues.

Pap smears obtained at the intake visit were interpreted centrally according to the 1991 Bethesda system for classification of cervicovaginal cytology. Results were classified as negative for squamous abnormality, atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance (ASCUS), low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (LSIL), high-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion (HSIL), and cancer; women with atypical glandular cells were categorized for analysis with HSIL. Colposcopy was prescribed by protocol for any abnormality, and for this analysis, women with any grade of abnormality were considered to have abnormal Pap test results. Cervical biopsies were assessed locally and graded as CIN 1–3, adenocarcinoma *in situ* (AIS), and cancer. Biopsies reported as CIN2, CIN3, AIS, or cancer were grouped as CIN2+.

In this retrospective analysis of prospectively collected data, we examined all intake Pap test results, along with demographic and behavioral information, cervical biopsy results wherever available, and cART use. All HIV-seropositive WIHS enrollees with baseline results were included. Women were excluded if they had missing Pap test results, prior hysterectomy, or a self-reported cervical cancer history.

HIV RNA level was measured at a certified laboratory. A lower limit of 4000 copies/ml was used as the lower limit, as that was the threshold for detection in the original enrollment cohort.

Comparison between enrollment groups was performed using the following tests: for continuous variables, ANOVA tests or Kruskal–Wallis tests if the variables were not normally distributed; for categorical variables,

chi-square tests or Fisher's exact tests if the cell size was small. Logistic regression modelling was used to model the point prevalence of abnormal Pap tests and CIN2+, adjusting for age, race, number of male sexual partners both recent and lifetime, and smoking. The logistic models with and without adjustment of the HIV factors: $CD4^+$ cell count, HIV viral load, cART use/adherence were studied. *P* for trends on enrollment period were obtained by treating the variable as ordinal. We elected to assess prevalence rather than progression/regression as prevalence integrates incidence and clearance and some women in later cohorts were enrolled on established cART. A two-sided *P*-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. SAS 9.3 was used for the statistical analysis.

Results

Of 3677 women enrolled in WIHS, 544 were excluded: 195 had missing Pap test results, whereas 262 had prior hysterectomy, and 87 self-reported a history of cervical cancer, leaving 3133 women for analysis.

Demographic characteristics of these eligible WIHS enrollees are shown in Table 1, categorized by enrollment dates. In addition to differences in cART use, women in later enrollment cohorts were older and more often African-American. They were less likely to smoke and reported more recent sexual partners. They had higher $CD4^+$ T-lymphocyte counts and lower HIV RNA levels.

The prevalence of abnormal Pap test results fell across successive cohorts. Table 2 shows the distribution of Pap test results by grade. The proportion of smears read as ASCUS/LSIL declined across time. In contrast, high-grade lesions were stably uncommon, accounting for only 1–3% of all Pap tests throughout the study period. The unadjusted prevalence of any Pap abnormality among women with Pap results was 679 of 1769 (38%) in the original 1994–1995 cohort, 195 of 684 (29%) in the 2001–2002 cohort, 46 of 231 (20%) in the 2011–2012 cohort, and 71 of 449 (16%) in the 2013–2015 cohort.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of cohorts of women enrolled in the Women's Interagency HIV Study[a].

Variable	Overall (*n* = 3328)	Enrollment 1994–1995 (n = 1868)	2001–2002 (*n* = 713)	2011–2012 (*n* = 243)	2013–2015 (*n* = 504)	*P* value
Age, mean (SD)	36.9 (8.3)	36.0 (7.3)	33.2 (7.1)	42.7 (7.2)	42.8 (9.2)	<0.0001
Race [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
White	466 (14)	352 (19)	51 (7)	19 (8)	44 (9)	
Hispanic	760 (23)	459 (25)	227 (32)	36 (15)	38 (8)	
Black	1995 (60)	1006 (54)	401 (56)	176 (72)	412 (82)	
Others	107 (3)	51 (3)	34 (5)	12 (5)	10 (2)	
Smoking [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
Never	1169 (35)	521 (28)	347 (49)	92 (38)	209 (41)	
Former	505 (15)	309 (17)	95 (13)	35 (14)	66 (13)	
Current	1647 (50)	1031 (55)	271 (38)	116 (48)	229 (45)	
Number of male sexual partners in past 6 months [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
0	972 (29)	619 (34)	141 (20)	71 (29)	141 (28)	
1	1803 (55)	958 (52)	452 (64)	136 (56)	257 (51)	
2	292 (9)	147 (8)	72 (10)	21 (9)	52 (10)	
At least 3	233 (7)	123 (7)	43 (6)	14 (6)	53 (11)	
$CD4^+$ cell count [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
>500	1213 (37)	482 (27)	333 (48)	124 (52)	274 (55)	
200–500	1350 (42)	775 (43)	295 (42)	103 (43)	177 (35)	
<200	675 (21)	543 (30)	71 (10)	12 (5)	49 (10)	
HIV viral load [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
4000 or less	1497 (46)	449 (25)	463 (66)	200 (82)	385 (81)	
4001∼20 000	597 (18)	420 (23)	118 (17)	24 (10)	35 (7)	
20 001∼100 000	632 (20)	480 (26)	94 (13)	14 (6)	44 (9)	
>100 000	515 (16)	474 (26)	24 (3)	5 (2)	12 (3)	
cART [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
No	1785 (54)	1298 (69)	319 (45)	77 (32)	91 (18)	
Yes	1543 (46)	570 (31)	394 (55)	166 (68)	413 (82)	
cART [*n* (%)]						<0.0001
No cART	1785 (54)	1298 (69)	319 (45)	77 (32)	91 (18)	
cART with integrase inhibitor	153 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)	17 (7)	136 (27)	
cART without integrase inhibitor	1390 (42)	570 (31)	394 (55)	149 (61)	277 (55)	
Duration of ART before BL in years, median (IQR)	0 (0–1.9)	0 (0–0)	2.0 (0–4.6)	1.2 (0.1–2.9)	3.0 (1.0–5.8)	<0.0001

cART, combination antiretroviral therapy.
[a]Excludes women with prior hysterectomy or a self-reported cervical cancer history and those missing Pap results or information about cART use.

Table 2. Distribution of Pap test results by grade across Women's Interagency HIV Study enrollment cohorts.

	Cohort				
	1994–1995	2001–2002	2011–2012	2013–2015	Total
Negative	1090 (62)[a]	489 (71)	185 (80)	378 (84)	2142
ASCUS[b]	368 (21)	118 (17)	28 (12)	33 (7)	547
LSIL[c]	268 (15)	65 (10)	16 (7)	26 (6)	375
HSIL+[d]	43 (2)	12 (2)	2 (1)	12 (3)	69
Total	1769 (56)	684 (22)	231 (7)	449 (14)	3133

N (row %).
[a]Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.
[b]Atypical squamous cells of undetermined significance.
[c]Low-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion.
[d]High-grade squamous intraepithelial lesion, atypical glandular cells, suspicious for malignancy.

To avoid misinterpreting as time-related trends differences in the abnormal Pap rates arising from differences in the distribution of cervical cancer risk factors arising from differences in recruitment criteria across the cohorts, we undertook multivariable analyses controlling for recognized cervical cancer risk factors. In one model (Tables 3 and 4), women in the most recently recruited cohort had less than half the risk for abnormal cytology seen in the initial enrollment cohort. Factors adjusted for in this model that also were associated with abnormal cytology included younger age, lower $CD4^+$ cell count, and higher HIV RNA level. Race, number of recent and lifetime sex partners, smoking history, and reported adherence to cART were not associated with prevalent abnormal cytology in this model. In a different model controlling for age, race, $CD4^+$ cell count, and HIV RNA level, later date at first recorded HIV diagnosis (rather than enrollment date) was associated with lower risk for abnormal cytology: compared with women infected before 1996, the odds ratio for abnormal cytology among those infected 1996–2001 was 0.91 (95% CI 0.70–1.16, $P = 0.44$), among those infected 2002–2007 was 0.89 (95% C.I. 063–1.25, $P = 0.49$), among those infected 2008–2011 was 0.44 (95% CI 0.28–0.69, $P = 0.0004$), and among those infected after 2011 was 0.57 (95% CI 0.34–0.98, $P = 0.04$), with P for trend 0.0004.

In a further model restricted to HIV seronegative women, beyond an initial drop between 1994–1995 and 2001–2002, we did not find a consistent decline in abnormal cytology across enrollment cohorts: compared with women in the 1994–1995 cohort, the odds ratio for abnormal cytology for those in the 2001–2002 cohort was 0.65 (95% CI 0.44–0.97, $P = 0.03$), for those in the 2011–2012 cohort 0.79 (95% CI 0.32–1.93, $P = 0.60$), and for those in the 2013–2015 cohort 0.66 (95% CI 0.37–1.17, $P = 0.15$ and P for trend 0.07).

We also assessed trends in prevalent cervical dysplasia diagnosed in our four cohorts. Tables 3 and 4 shows the distribution of histologic results across enrollment cohorts. Table 5 shows that after adjusting for known risk factors, CIN2+ prevalence appeared to increase across time (P for trend = 0.07)., with $CD4^+$ remaining the major risk factor. However, by adjusting for cART, $CD4^+$ cell counts and HIV RNA level, the model in Table 5 essentially separates calendar time (i.e. enrollment date) from the improvements in host immune status that were introduced over time. In another analysis, we found that after excluding cART, $CD4^+$ cell counts and HIV RNA level there was no significant relation of enrollment date with CIN-2+ (Table 6).

Table 3. Multivariable analyses of probability of prevalent abnormal Pap result after adjustment for enrollment $CD4^+$ cell count, enrollment HIV RNA level, and adherence to combination antiretroviral therapy.

Full model		95% CI		
Variable	Odds ratio	LCL	UCL	*P* value
Enrollment cohort				
1994–1995 (ref)	1			<0.0001[a]
2001–2002	0.79	0.59	1.05	0.11
2011–2012	0.67	0.43	1.04	0.07
2013–20115	0.41	0.27	0.62	<.0001
Age (years)				
<30 (ref)	1			
30–34	0.81	0.62	1.06	0.13
35–39	0.49	0.37	0.66	<0.0001
40–44	0.47	0.33	0.65	<0.0001
>=45	0.47	0.33	0.67	<0.0001
Race				
White (ref)	1			
Hispanic	0.99	0.70	1.41	0.97
Black	1.15	0.84	1.56	0.38
Others	1.45	0.83	2.54	0.19
Number of male sexual partners in past 6 months				
0 (ref)	1			
1	0.93	0.74	1.17	0.54
2	1.15	0.80	1.66	0.45
At least 3	0.89	0.60	1.35	0.59
Lifetime number of sex partners				
<5 (ref)	1			
5–9	1.07	0.80	1.44	0.65
10–49	1.00	0.75	1.32	0.98
At least 50	1.24	0.90	1.70	0.18
Smoking				
Never (ref)	1			
Former	0.98	0.72	1.34	0.89
Current	1.11	0.88	1.39	0.37
$CD4^+$ cell count (cells/μl)				
>500 (ref)	1			
200–500	2.03	1.63	2.53	<0.0001
<200	4.87	3.57	6.64	<0.0001
HIV RNA level (copies/ml)				
<=4000 (ref)	1			
4001∼20 000	0.95	0.71	1.26	0.71
20 001∼100 000	1.37	1.03	1.82	0.03
>100 000	1.57	1.11	2.21	0.01
cART use/adherence				
No (ref)	1			
Yes adherence < 95%	1.57	1.00	2.48	0.052
Yes adherence > 95%	1.35	0.97	1.87	0.07

cART, combination antiretroviral therapy; CI, confidence interval; LCL, lower confidence limit; UCL, upper confidence limit.
[a]*P* value for trend.

Table 4. Results of cervical biopsies across Women's Interagency HIV Study enrollment cohorts.

	1994–1995	2001–2002	2011–2012	2013–2015	Total
Normal/benign/no biopsy	1578 (88.9)	623 (91.1)	218 (94.0)	409 (89.1)	2828 (89.8)
CIN1	141 (7.9)	41 (6.0)	10 4.3)	33 (7.2)	225 (7.1)
CIN2	40 (2.3)	10 (1.5)	3 (1.3)	12 (2.6)	65 (2.1)
CIN3+	17 (1.0)	10 (1.5)	1 (0.4)	5 (1.1)	33 (1.1)
Total	1776 (56.3)	684 (21.7)	232 (7.3)	459 (14.5)	3151 (100.0)

Values are expressed in *N* (%).

Discussion

Across the past two decades, risk for abnormal cytology has fallen markedly among women with HIV. This does not appear to reflect a broad secular trend, as we did not find a similar marked decline among HIV-seronegative comparison women enrolled in WIHS. Lower prevalence appears to be due in part to use of cART and associated improvements in immunity as reflected in better $CD4^+$ cell counts and lower HIV RNA levels among more recent recruits to WIHS. However, enrollment cohort remained a significant correlate of declining prevalence of

Table 5. Multivariable analysis of probability of prevalent grade 2 cervical intraepithelial neoplasia or a more severe lesion after adjustment for age, race, sex (recent and lifetime), smoking, $CD4^+$ T-cell count, HIV viral load, and combination antiretroviral therapy use/adherence.

		95% CI		
Variable	Odds ratio	LCL	UCL	*P*-value
Enrollment				
1994–1995 (ref)	1			0.07[a]
2001–2002	1.47	0.69	3.10	0.32
2011–2012	1.25	0.36	4.32	0.72
2013–2015	2.43	0.96	6.14	0.06
Age				
<30 (ref)	1			
30–34	1.15	0.59	2.23	0.69
35–39	0.44	0.19	1.03	0.06
40–44	0.40	0.15	1.06	0.07
At least 45	0.57	0.23	1.39	0.22
Race				
White (ref)	1			
Hispanic	1.02	0.43	2.43	0.97
Black	0.81	0.38	1.76	0.60
Others	0.41	0.05	3.36	0.40
Number of recent sex partners				
0 (ref)	1			
1	0.71	0.40	1.29	0.26
2	0.86	0.33	2.25	0.75
At least 3	0.94	0.34	2.57	0.90
Lifetime # of sex partners				
<5 (ref)	1			
5–9	0.98	0.45	2.13	0.96
10–49	1.14	0.56	2.36	0.72
At least 50	0.80	0.33	1.94	0.62
Smoking				
Never (ref)	1			
Former	1.51	0.67	3.40	0.32
Current	1.62	0.88	2.98	0.12
$CD4^+$ cell count (cells/μl)				
>500 (ref)	1			
200–500	4.19	2.09	8.39	<0.0001
<200	5.27	2.19	12.68	0.0002
HIV viral load (copies/ml)				
4000 or less (ref)	1			
4001∼20 000	0.86	0.39	1.92	0.72
20 001∼100 000	0.87	0.40	1.90	0.72
>100 000	1.27	0.52	3.08	0.60
cART[e] use/adherence				
No (ref)	1			
Yes adherence < 95%	0.80	0.25	2.58	0.70
Yes adherence > 95%	1.14	0.50	2.56	0.76

cART, combination antiretroviral therapy; CI, confidence interval; LCL, lower confidence limit; UCL, upper confidence limit.
[a]*P* value for trend.

Table 6. Multivariable analysis of probability of prevalent grade 2 cervical intraepithelial neoplasia or a more severe lesion after adjustment for age, race, sex (recent and lifetime), smoking.

Variable	Odds ratio	95% CI		*P* value
		LCL	UCL	
Enrollment				
1994–1995 (ref)	1			0.39[a]
2001–2002	0.90	0.53	1.55	0.71
2011–2012	0.67	0.23	1.93	0.46
2013–2015	1.50	0.81	2.79	0.20
Age (years)				
<30 (ref)	1			
30–34	1.37	0.77	2.42	0.28
35–39	0.83	0.44	1.57	0.57
40–44	0.53	0.24	1.20	0.13
At least 45	0.79	0.37	1.69	0.54
Race				
White (ref)	1			
Hispanic	1.10	0.56	2.14	0.78
Black	0.77	0.42	1.41	0.39
Others	0.92	0.26	3.29	0.90
Number of recent sex partners				
0 (ref)	1			
1	0.94	0.58	1.52	0.81
2	0.82	0.34	1.94	0.65
At least 3	1.03	0.42	2.53	0.94
Number of lifetime sex partners				
<5 (ref)	1			
5–9	0.89	0.49	1.64	0.71
10–49	0.79	0.44	1.41	0.42
>=50	0.58	0.29	1.16	0.12
Smoking				
Never (ref)	1			
Former	1.15	0.56	2.34	0.70
Current	1.81	1.10	2.98	0.02

CI, confidence interval; LCL, lower confidence limit; UCL, upper confidence limit.
[a]*P* value for trend.

abnormal cytology in multivariable analyses that controlled for these changes. A decline in smoking may have contributed but was not correlated with prevalence in these multivariate models. Healthier recent enrollees were more likely than original WIHS participants to have multiple and recent sexual partners and yet were less likely to have abnormal Pap tests. Our findings deserve confirmation in other large cohorts.

Despite the declining prevalence of abnormal Paps among US women with HIV, they remain at significant risk for abnormal cervical cytology, reflecting their increased risk for opportunistic infection with HPV, for cervical precancer, and for cervical cancer.

We have previously reported that during follow-up within the WIHS, which includes semiannual cytology screening and treatment of precancer, the rate of Pap abnormalities has declined among [7]. This decline was present for atypical, low-grade, and high-grade cytology results. These results included both prevalent and incident findings and may have reflected both secular declines in abnormal cytology and the impact of diagnosis and treatment of prevalent cervical lesions. Our current results focus on prevalent findings at enrollment, eliminating study-mediated cervical treatment during follow-up as a cause of a lower rate of abnormal Pap tests. Taken together, falling prevalence and the impact of treatment indicate that the burden of cervical disease on women with HIV has declined substantially over the past two decades.

Interestingly, these decreases in abnormal Pap prevalence over time were detected even after adjustment for $CD4^+$ cell count, HIV RNA level, and cART use in the model. This indicates that these factors did not fully account for the temporal trend. Prior studies in WIHS have shown that other immune cells may also affect the risk of persistent HPV infection in HIV+ women, including levels of plasmacytoid dendritic cells [13], and levels of these cells also improve with use of cART [14]. Thus, immune factors not accounted for in the current study could help explain these trends.

Other potential reasons for declining rates of cervical abnormality among women with HIV are unclear. Among women of similar age in the general population, abnormal Pap test rates recently have been stable to increased [15], and we did not find a comparable strong trend of declining abnormal Pap prevalence in WIHS enrollees without HIV infection. This suggests that our results may be particular to women with HIV. An increase in the diagnostic stringency for reporting ASC-US may have influenced the prevalence of abnormal Pap tests in our study population. Although we controlled for recent number of sexual partners, unmeasured changes in sexual behaviors associated with HPV risk may have occurred. Although HPV vaccination has led to declines in HPV16 prevalence among young US women by 2014, our enrollees were generally beyond the age to receive HPV vaccination and unlikely to have been benefitted from off-label HPV vaccination or vaccine-associated herd immunity [13]. More widespread HIV testing may have led to more women being aware of their HIV infections prior to study enrollment and modified sexual risk practices accordingly, reducing abnormal Pap risk. More recently enrolled cohorts also may have had better access to gynecologic care as healthcare delivery systems for women with HIV have become more comprehensive over the past two decades. WIHS investigators have shown that HPV detection is reduced among women with normal vaginal microbiome profiles [16]. Improvement in the vaginal microbiota in WIHS across time [17] may have contributed to falling rates of abnormal Pap tests.

In contrast to the decline in abnormal cytology prevalence across time in women enrolled in WIHS, we found only a borderline increase in the prevalence of CIN2+ across cohorts after adjusting for $CD4^+$ cell count, HIV RNA level, and cART use. In any event, even after excluding these variables from the model, the rate of

CIN-2+ did not decrease with later WIHS enrollment. This finding is congruent with previous reports from WIHS that lower $CD4^+$ cell counts among women with HIV were associated with only a moderate increase in HPV16 prevalence, the most carcinogenic HPV type, and much greater increases in risk for less oncogenic HPV types. This has suggested that HPV16 is already immunoevasive such that immunosuppression by HIV does not release HPV16 infections from immunosurveillance as much as is seen for other types, and that the corollary is also likely true, namely, that HPV16 prevalence does not decrease as much as other HPV types following immune reconstitution. Thus, it could be anticipated that lower grade lesions would be more greatly impacted by changes in host immune status than CIN-2+. Our finding that time has led to a lower prevalence of abnormal cytology but not CIN2+ suggests that healthier recent WIHS enrollees have less opportunistic, nononcogenic HPV but have persisting high risk for precancerous cervical lesions and continue to merit prompt colposcopy when abnormal cytology is reported, including ASC-US results linked to evidence of carcinogenic HPV infection.

Prior studies using smaller populations have had limited statistical power; for example, the HIV Epidemiologic Research Study concluded that HAART was not associated with progression ($P = 0.06$) or regression ($P = 0.05$) of cytologic abnormality despite hazard ratios suggesting improved outcome [6]. In addition, WIHS data have shown that controlling for cART adherence and effectiveness, as measured by HIV RNA detection, is important in assessing cART's impact on HPV and cervical disease [3].

This study was limited by several factors. Serial observational cohorts recruited to a research study may not reflect the demographics and the distribution of cervical cancer risk factors in the larger population of US women infected with HIV, and observed changes in abnormal Pap rates may reflect changes among women willing to enroll in research. Additional research is needed to determine whether the decline in abnormal cytology that we have observed can be found in other national cohorts and in the general US population. That said, the WIHS cohort has been shown to be similar in demographic and HIV-related risk behavior to US women with HIV [10,11] and one of the strengths of this study was its ability to measure how cervical cytology results changed in women infected with HIV based on successive recruitment rounds using standardized enrollment methods and protocols for collection of medical information and cervical screening over time.

Other limitations should be considered in interpreting our results. Pap tests do not always reflect the presence or grade of underlying cervical lesions, but women infected with HIV face logistical and other barriers to colposcopy that may bias analyses of the prevalence of cervical intraepithelial neoplasia. In addition, Pap abnormality rates provide a measure of the burden faced by women with HIV, as all require careful follow-up, given the increased risk for cervical cancer among these immunocompromised women. Finally, we cannot exclude the possibility that the cytopathology community has developed more stringent criteria for the reporting of ASCUS/LSIL across the past two decades.

We cannot speculate on how changes in risk factors for cervical cancer have impacted the clinical burden of abnormal Pap test results for US women with HIV and the clinicians and health systems that care for them, as our cohort enrollments may not fully reflect how the HIV epidemic has changed across time. Multivariable analysis attempted to balance the distribution of cervical cancer risk factors across cohorts, but we cannot exclude the possibility that unidentified differences in our cohorts account for the observed decline in abnormal cytology across time. To minimize the risk for this, we did include in multivariable analysis commonly recognized cervical cancer risks even if they did not appear correlated with Pap abnormality in our enrollees. We did find that host immune status as measured by HIV RNA level and $CD4^+$ cell count continue to have a major impact on rates of abnormal Pap tests. Overall, a more than 50% decline in the prevalence of abnormal cytology among women with HIV, as identified in this large, long-term study, will ease the burden of cervical cancer prevention in this at-risk population. However, stable rates of CIN2+ mean that clinicians caring for these women will still need to maintain networks for referral for colposcopy and dysplasia treatment. More research is also needed to determine whether declining prevalence of abnormal cytology reflects changes in the type distribution of HPV infection; this may assist clinicians and women in deciding whether to be screened with Pap or HPV testing, with the latter test more sensitive but with poor specificity among women with HIV. Further declines in abnormal cytology rates can be expected as young women vaccinated against HPV and presumably protected against cancer enter screening and mature into age cohorts at highest risk for cervical precancer and cancer.

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Conflicts of interest

T.M.D. reports the following financial relationships: research supplies for anal cytology: Hologic. Advisory Board: BD, Roche; Consultant: TheVax, Antiva, nVision. The remaining authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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