

NEARLY HALF OF US ADULTS INFECTED WITH GENITAL HPV

US LETS 23ANDME MARKET GENETIC HEALTH RISK REPORTS

NEW YORK: Health officials say nearly half of US adults have caught HPV, a sexually-transmitted bug that can cause cervical cancer and genital warts. About 45 percent of Americans ages 18 to 59 had some form of genital human papillomavirus, according to a report released Thursday that's the most complete look at how common HPV is among adults.

More concerning, about 25 percent of men and 20 percent of women had certain strains that carry a higher risk of

cancer. There are more than 150 HPV viruses. In most cases, HPV goes away on its own. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said most sexually active people will get HPV.

Vaccinations against HPV first became available in 2006, aimed at protecting kids before they become sexually active.

Meanwhile, US regulators on Thursday granted Silicon Valley biotech firm 23andMe permission to become the first company to market reports

showing customers' health risks based on their genetics.

The first reports will be made available this month in the United States, indicating genetic propensities for conditions such as Parkinson's disease and late-onset Alzheimer's disease, according to the Food and Drug Administration. "Consumers can now have direct access to certain genetic risk information," said Jeffrey Shuren, director of the FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health.

"But it is important that people understand that genetic risk is just one piece of the bigger puzzle, it does not mean they will or won't ultimately develop a disease."

23andMe extracts genetic data from saliva samples sent in by customers. The private company had been focusing on providing ancestry information after the FDA reined in efforts to offer genetics-based health information about four years ago. "I am proud to say we are the first and only company to receive FDA authorization to market genetic health risk reports without a prescription," said 23andMe co-founder and chief Anne Wojcicki, the ex-wife of Google co-founder Sergey Brin.

"It's a defining moment-giving individuals direct access to more information about how their DNA could impact their health." The FDA said it granted permission for 23andMe to market "personal genome service genetic health risk" tests for ten diseases or conditions in a first-of-its-kind service direct to consumers.

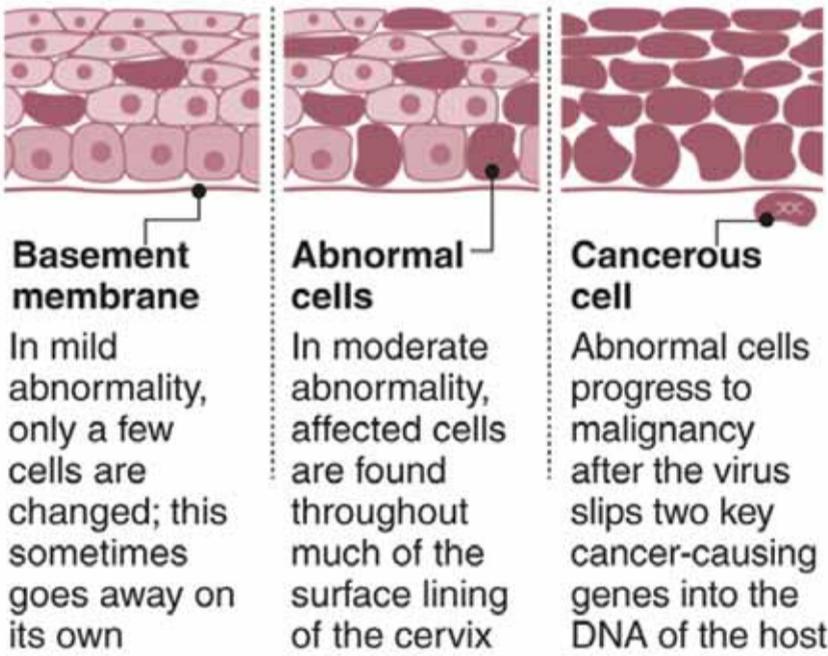
Test results could help people make more informed decisions when it comes to lifestyle or spur more insightful discussions with health care providers, according to the FDA.

The agency stressed that factors other than genetics, such as lifestyle and pollution, play roles when it comes to health. The 23andMe tests were specifically barred from serving as the sole basis for major medical treatment decisions, the FDA said. 23andMe was founded in 2006 and is based in Mountain View, California, where Google also has its headquarters. The 23andMe "Health + Ancestry" report costs \$199. A genetic test focused on ancestry alone is \$99. — Agencies

HPV From Infection to Cancer

"High-risk" human papillomavirus (HPV) types have the potential to lead to cancer over a decade or longer. When the virus infects cells, it gradually causes increasingly severe damage.

Squamous cells



MCT Source: Dr. Richard M. Haupt, Merck & Co.



KIEV: Acting Health Minister of Ukraine Juliana Suprun (center), along with others participates in an outdoor sport exercise to mark World Health Day in Kiev yesterday.—AP

URUGUAY TO START SELLING MARIJUANA IN PHARMACIES

MONTEVIDEO: Uruguay will become the world's first country to allow recreational marijuana to be sold in pharmacies starting in July, the president's office said Thursday.

The move is the last step in implementing a revolutionary law that the South American country adopted in 2013 that fully legalized the production, sale and consumption of marijuana. The most innovative-and controversial-aspect of the law, pharmacy sales, had been on hold, with no clear timeline for when it would begin. But President Tabare Vazquez's administration put an end to the uncertainty at a news conference.

"Cannabis will be dispensed in pharmacies starting in the month of July," said presidential aide Juan Andres Roballo, the head of the National Drugs Council. "Sometime in the first two weeks of July," he added when asked by reporters. Under the law, buyers must sign up for a national registry of marijuana users to ensure they have fulfilled licensing procedures and do not exceed the monthly maximum purchase of 40 grams (1.4 ounces).

The registry-which is open only to Uruguayan citizens and permanent residents-will be up and running on May 2, Roballo said. A gram of pot will cost \$1.30, said the secretary general of the National Drugs Council, Diego Olivera.

The drug will be sold in packets of five or 10 grams, with only the smaller size available initially, he said. Part of the proceeds will fund government drug-use prevention programs.

Far from covering demand The marijuana sold in pharmacies is being grown by private companies in state-supervised fields. The country has so far stockpiled 400 kilograms (880 pounds), produced by two different firms.

"We're far from covering the real demand," said Roballo. But starting sales will enable the companies to ramp up production, he said. Under the law, users also have the option to grow their own pot at home, or join cannabis clubs that grow it in cooperatives.

Only 16 pharmacies have signed agreements with the government to supply marijuana so far. The government is hoping to reach at least 30 by the time sales begin. Uruguay, a country of 3.4 million people, has an estimated 150,000 regular marijuana users. Advocates of the law say it will funnel money away from drug traffickers, toward legal businesses and the state. Roballo said the government's marijuana would be "every bit" as potent as that sold by dealers.

"Buyers will have complete certainty about the quality of the product they are consuming, and so the risks will diminish considerably," he said. The marijuana law was passed under former president Jose Mujica (2010-2015), a colorful ex-guerrilla fighter known for living in a run-down farmhouse, driving a beat-up Volkswagen Beetle and giving most of his salary to charity.

It made an uncomfortable inheritance for his ally and successor, Vazquez-a cancer doctor who passed strict anti-smoking legislation when he served a first presidential term from 2005 to 2010.

Vazquez's government said in 2015 that it was in "no hurry" to implement the law. But it reluctantly agreed to follow through in the end. — AFP

DOCTORS MUST CHECK WEATHER FORECASTS TO STOP EPIDEMICS

LONDON: Health agencies in Africa need to start consulting seasonal weather forecasts to help prepare for malaria epidemics and ensure outbreaks are spotted early and curbed before they become severe, a malaria expert said. Rising temperatures, floods and droughts can cause major epidemics in areas not usually affected by malaria, particularly as people may lack immunity to the disease and are therefore more likely to fall ill or even die, said Tarekegn Abeku, senior technical specialist at international non-profit Malaria Consortium.

Weather forecasts are vital to help health agencies know where to increase vigilance "so that if there is an outbreak you can take action immediately", he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation from his London office. Forecasters are getting better at predicting these threatening weather pat-

terns - sometimes months in advance - as they become more frequent and more severe in many countries as the climate changes. But currently most health agencies in Africa have "no organised way of looking at information related to climate change", said Abeku.

El nino and malaria

"Most malaria epidemics follow abnormal weather conditions, often in combination with other causes, including increased resistance of the parasite to antimalarial drugs," he said. In the last 60 years in Ethiopia, for example, most outbreaks have been associated with El Nino or La Nina weather patterns, which can bring higher temperatures, more rainfall or drought, Abeku said. —Reuters