



**In the news . . .**

**HPV linked to other types of genital cancer**

Human papillomaviruses (HPVs) that cause genital warts are known to cause cervical cancer. Now researchers in Finland have established that some HPV infections are risk factors for other types of genital cancer (*BMJ* 1997;315[7109]). In a large population-based study, 81 cases of genital cancer were identified among 700 000 people who had donated samples to a blood bank. Tests for various HPV strains showed that HPV type 16 confers an increased risk of genital cancer other than cervical cancer, particularly vulvar and vaginal cancer.

**Seeing with your fingers**

People who are blind have superior tactile abilities, and a new study explains why (*Nature* 1997;389:180). Researchers found that visually impaired subjects, but not sighted subjects, were using their visual cortex while reading Braille or embossed Roman (regular) letters. Disrupting the visual cortex caused errors in reading in the visually impaired subjects. The researchers believe that visual impairment leads people to use the visual cortex in a new way, to process touch.

**Heart disease starts in the womb**

A Finnish study of birth weight and maternal weight at birth has found that low birth weight is significantly linked to death from heart disease later in life (*BMJ* 1997;315[7112]). As well, having a short mother with a high body mass index represents a strong risk factor for death from heart disease. The authors speculate

that Westernization of a society leads first to malnutrition in mothers, then to obesity, then to growth and better nutrition.

**Hip fractures and smoking**

A new meta-analysis shows that bone density is lower and the risk of a fracture is higher in postmenopausal women who smoke versus those who don't (*BMJ* 1997;315[7112]). Pooled data from 29 cross-sectional studies showed that 1 hip fracture in 8 is attributable to smoking.

**Tuberous sclerosis gene found**

Researchers have found 1 of the 2 genes responsible for a rare familial tumour syndrome, tuberous sclerosis (*Science* 1997;277:805-8). The condition affects about 1 in 6000 people, who are afflicted with hamartomas throughout many organ systems. The gene, *TSC1*, is located on chromosome 9q34.

**Debunking link between IBD and measles vaccine**

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), including Crohn's disease, is associated with measles infection in early childhood, according to some studies. Another study has raised concern about the safety of live attenuated measles vaccine, showing that it may

be associated with later development of bowel disease. Now a case-control study in England has shown no association between measles vaccination and bowel disease (*Lancet* 1997; 350:764-6). Odds that a patient with bowel disease was vaccinated were the same as in the control group.

**Rare side effect of vaccination**

US researchers have looked into 60 cases of hair loss after routine vaccinations (*JAMA* 1997;278:1176-8). Most of the cases involved women, and most involved hepatitis B vaccine, either the currently available recombinant vaccines or the older plasma-derived versions. The cases indicate that hair loss may be a rare side effect of vaccination.

**Social status predicts recovery from heart attack**

Previous studies have found that a patient's social class is associated with the risk of heart disease and death. Now researchers have discovered that upper-class men are significantly more likely than middle- or lower-class men to have improved functional status in the year after a heart attack (*Ann Intern Med* 1997;127:518-25). The study looked at 2145 men at 25 centres in Canada and the US and controlled for other risk factors.

**Little green sprouts better than giant green broccoli**



Researchers looking at the value of broccoli and cauliflower to protect against cancer were astonished to find that 3-day-old sprouts of these plants contain 10 to 100 times more of the key chemical than mature plants (*Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 1997;94:10367-72). Extracts from the sprouts were highly effective in reducing the incidence and development of mammary tumours in rats.

