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In a world first, scientists are studying hundreds of pairs of female twins around Australia to find the link between cervical cancer and the human papilloma virus (HPV).

Identical and non identical female twins between the ages of 25 – 69 are signing up for the research which aims to discover what causes the progression of cervical cancer from infection by HPV.

The national study is being coordinated by the Royal Women's Hospital, The University of Melbourne and the Australian Twin Registry (ATR), which is seeking more participants.

“HPV is an extremely common virus. Around 80 percent of women are exposed at some point in their lives but would not know it,” said study coordinator Professor Suzanne Garland of the University of Melbourne's Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the Royal Women's Hospital.

“For some women, the virus can lead to cell changes in the cervix, which can lead to cervical cancer. This study aims to understand the genetic and environmental factors that cause HPV to lead to cervical cancer.

“Although vaccines and Pap screens go a long way in combating cervical cancer, identifying the specific factors that trigger its progression from HPV will lead to its eradication,” she said.

This world-first study will examine why some women experience a progression of the disease and others do not. “Is it all a matter of genetics, or is it solely the impact of lifestyle factors such as smoking or stress?” asked Professor Garland.

Professor John Wark, a member of the ATR Expert Scientific Committee, and Professor of University of Melbourne's Faculty of Medicine, said twins offer a novel opportunity for comparison of genetic and environmental factors. “As twins are matched genetically, researchers can determine the subtle differences involved in the development of the disease. In this collaborative study, we aim to gain a much better understanding of a woman's risk of developing cervical cancer and to establish preventative measures for these high-risk women,” he said

The ATR, which has received NHMRC funding for the study, wants many more twins from around Australia to sign up. Participation will involve a questionnaire and permission for researchers to access participant's pap screening histories for scientific comparison.

To register visit: www.twins.org.au or call 1800 037 021.

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