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U of L center licenses cervical-cancer vaccine

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The University of Louisville's James Graham Brown Cancer Center has licensed technology for an inexpensive cervical-cancer vaccine produced in tobacco plants to a private company -- and officials say human testing could begin as soon as 2009.

The cancer center licensed the drug to Advanced Cancer Therapeutics, a private, for-profit company based in Louisville that brings anti-cancer therapies to market. The company has an arrangement with U of L allowing it to obtain exclusive worldwide licenses to therapies discovered at the cancer center.

Randall Riggs, president and Chief Executive Officer of the company, said if they get permission from the federal government, they may be able to start Phase I clinical trials sometime next year in the United States.

Later clinical trials might take place in a developing country, such as India, where rates of cervical cancer are much higher than in the United States, but many patients can't afford the currently-available vaccine. Merck and Co.'s Gardasil, which targets the sexually-transmitted human papillomavirus that causes most cervical cancer, costs about \$360 for the three necessary doses. Researchers have said the new vaccine could cost as little as \$3.

Riggs said if all goes well, the second-generation vaccine could arrive on the market "very soon," possibly "less than five years" from 2009.

The vaccine, to be produced in Kentucky tobacco plants, targets the HPV L2 protein, a different target than other vaccines on the market. Researchers working on the drug say it may provide broader immune protection against a greater number of the more than 200 strains of HPV.

It is based on research by U of L Professor Dr. A. Bennett Jenson in Louisville, Associate Professor Kenneth Palmer in Owensboro, Ky., and their colleagues. Jenson and colleague Shin-je Ghim helped invent Gardasil.

"The human papillomavirus is the leading cause of cervical cancer and is increasingly being implicated in other cancers, such as those of the head and neck," Jenson said. "As we learn more about the virus, it is becoming even more important to be able to protect people from preventable cancers by vaccinating them against this disease."

Read more in tomorrow's Courier-Journal.
