

## BIOMEDICINE

# Reducing the risk of ovarian cancer

Birth control pills lessen risk of ovarian cancer even among women carrying harmful mutations in one of the so-called breast cancer genes, *BRCA1* and *BRCA2*, a new study finds.

A team led by researchers at the University of Toronto and Women's College Hospital in Toronto compared 207 patients who had ovarian cancer and a mutated *BRCA* gene with 161 of these women's sisters who didn't have the cancer. The patients averaged 54 years old and the sisters 52 years old. Half of the patients reported having used birth control pills at some point in their lives, on average for 4 years. Among the 50 sisters without cancer who carried the *BRCA1* mutation, 77 percent had taken oral contraception, averaging 5 years on the pill. Only three of the sisters showed the *BRCA2* mutation.

The data demonstrated that risk of ovarian cancer decreases as years of birth-control pill use increases. Taking birth control pills for 6 years lowers the risk by nearly two-thirds, the authors report in the Aug. 13 *NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE*.

"This tells us that genetics isn't entirely determining our fate," says study coauthor Steven A. Narod, a cancer geneticist. He and his colleagues estimate that 10 percent of all ovarian cancer cases are due to heredity.

—N.S.