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 1(b) CYCLIC CHANGES IN VAGINA

Studies in nonhuman primates indicate that changes in the thickness and integrity of the vaginal epithelium affect the transmission rates of HIV-1, but few studies have examined the normal variations that may occur in the vagina of normal macaques as a result of aging or changes in the menstrual cycle. This study was conducted to determine if differences occur in the thickness of the vaginal mucosa with age or menses. Vaginal mucosal thickness was compared in 46 rhesus macaques grouped as juvenile (1-3 years old), mature cycling (3-21 years old), and geriatric (> 21 years old). Epithelia of mature cycling macaques were also compared at different stages of the menstrual cycle. Older females (> 21 years) had the thinnest and least keratinized epithelium of all groups, followed by the youngest females (< 3 years). The vaginal epithelium was also thinner in cycling macaques during menses compared to the follicular stage. In addition, young, geriatric, or cycling macaques during menses had minimal keratinization. We hypothesize that normal physiologic changes in the vaginal epithelium of women occur with age and menses, which may affect a woman's susceptibility to HIV-1 transmission and other sexually transmitted diseases. Also, age and menstrual cycle should be considered when designing vaginal transmission experiments in rhesus macaques.

 1 (c) CYCLIC CHANGE IN THE BREAST

Each month, women go through changes in the hormones that make up the normal menstrual cycle. The hormone estrogen is produced by the ovaries in the first half of the menstrual cycle. It stimulates the growth of milk ducts in the breasts. The increasing level of estrogen leads to ovulation halfway through the cycle. Next, the hormone progesterone takes over in the second half of the cycle. It stimulates the formation of the milk glands. These hormones are believed to be responsible for the cyclical changes that many women feel in their breasts just before menstruation. These include swelling, pain, and soreness.

During menstruation, many women also have changes in breast texture. Their breasts may feel very lumpy. This is because the glands in the breast are enlarging to get ready for a possible pregnancy. If pregnancy does not happen, the breasts go back to normal size. Once menstruation starts, the cycle begins again.

 2(b) HORMONAL REGULATION OF THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

The menstrual cycle is regulated by the coordinated functions of the hypothalamus, pituitary, ovaries, and endometrium. The pulsatile secretion of gonadotropin-releasing hormone from the hypothalamus stimulates the anterior pituitary to secrete follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH) and luteinizing hormone (LH), which in turn stimulates the development of ovarian follicles and the production of ovarian steroids. A negative feedback mechanism is crucial for its control and regulation. During the follicular phase, the recruited follicle prepares for ovulation. After the LH surge and ovulation, the luteal phase begins. The follicular and luteal phases correspond to the proliferative and secretory phases of the endometrium, which develops during the proliferative phase and is maintained during the secretory phase to prepare for implantation of the fertilized embryo. The endometrium is shed during menses in the early follicular/proliferative phase, and the cycle continues.