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Hormones may offer new hope

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Australian researchers are developing a hormone tablet to prevent ovarian cancer by piggy-backing on the way pregnancy, breastfeeding and the contraceptive pill dramatically reduce risk of the deadly disease.

Three Australian researchers have been awarded a share of \$1.5 million from the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation to devise better treatments for the disease.

Associate Professor Pradeep Tanwar, from the University of Newcastle, has been given \$566,000 to exploit the established link between hormones and ovarian cancer risk — with progesterone suppressing and oestrogen promoting growth of cancer cells — to develop the first prevention.

“Reproductive health plays an important role in whether you get ovarian cancer, even if you have a family history,” Associate Professor Tanwar said. “We know that taking the oral contraceptive for five years gives you a 50 per cent reduction in your risk.

“Having your first child is almost a 40 per cent reduction and breastfeeding is almost 30 per cent. We now want to look at the compounds already used for other conditions such as fibroids, infertility or inducing ovulation in IVF to see if they have a prevention benefit.”

Melbourne’s Maree Bilandzic, from the Hudson Institute of Medical Research, has been awarded almost \$800,000 to screen drugs already on the pharmacy shelf — treatments used for everything from fungal

infections, other cancers and anti-nausea therapies — to test their hidden potential to fight ovarian cancer.

Dr Bilandzic is targeting the “leader cells”, a small population of cells that survive and thrive in the face of chemotherapy, and investigating ways to overcome them by repurposing other medications. “Certain drugs have indications that we haven’t really explored as yet,” Dr Bilandzic said.

Queensland’s Associate Professor Jason Lee, from the QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute, has also been funded to develop a new drug to make tumours more sensitive to chemotherapy.