

New treatment combination proves safe for head and neck cancer patients

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Patients undergoing treatment for advanced head and neck cancers may respond well to the addition of gefinitib to chemotherapy, according to a study sponsored by the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group and chaired by Ethan Argiris, M.D., associate professor of medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, and co-leader of the Head and Neck Cancer Program of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute (UPCI). The results will be disclosed at the 45th annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) on May 30 in Orlando, Fla.

"We found that adding gefinitib to standard chemotherapy was well-tolerated by patients who had already received chemotherapy or were frail," said Dr. Argiris. "We had hoped this study would improve the survival rate of patients, but while gefinitib did postpone spread of the disease, it did not increase survival rates. The finding that the addition of gefinitib to chemotherapy can delay the growth of head and neck cancer suggests a potential beneficial effect from combination therapy."

One group of 136 patients in the placebo-controlled study received [docetaxel](#) alone, a standard treatment for head and neck cancer. A second group of 134 patients received gefinitib in addition to docetaxel. This was the first phase III randomized trial to examine the addition of gefinitib to [chemotherapy](#) for patients with head and [neck cancer](#). Gefinitib, which also is known by the trade name Iressa, is a targeted therapy against the [epidermal growth factor](#) receptor (EGFR) with fewer side effects than traditional chemotherapies. Patients were able to take

the drug orally and tolerated it well.

Dr. Argiris plans to conduct further studies to identify the subsets of patients most likely to respond to the drug and to examine patients' quality of life while taking the [combination therapy](#).

Head and neck cancers are a group of biologically similar cancers originating from the upper aerodigestive tract, including the lip, mouth, nasal cavity, paranasal sinuses, pharynx and larynx that affect more than 45,000 individuals in the U.S. each year. Head and neck cancers are strongly associated with environmental and lifestyle risk factors, including tobacco smoking, alcohol consumption and certain strains of the sexually transmitted human papilloma virus.

Source: University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences ([news : web](#))

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