

Cheap malaria drug could treat colorectal cancer effectively too, say experts

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Medical experts say a common malaria drug could have a significant impact on colorectal cancer providing a cheap adjunct to current expensive chemotherapy.

A pilot study by researchers at St George's, University of London, has found the drug artesunate, which is a widely used anti-malaria medicine, had a promising effect on reducing the multiplication of tumour cells in [colorectal cancer](#) patients who were already going to have their cancer surgically removed.

Colorectal cancer (CRC) makes up about 10 percent of the annual 746,000 global cancer cases in men and 614,000 cases in women.

In the UK, 110 new cases are diagnosed daily, with older patients particularly at risk of death. Prognosis even with the best available treatments does not increase disease free or overall survival beyond 60 percent, five years after diagnosis.

Professor Sanjeev Krishna, an infectious disease expert at St George's who jointly-led the study, said: "There is therefore a continuing and urgent need to develop new, cheap, orally effective and safe colorectal cancer treatments.

"Our approach in this study was to take a close look at an existing drug that already had some anticancer properties in experimental settings, and to assess its safety and efficacy in patients.

"The results have been more than encouraging and can offer hopes of finding effective treatment options that are cheaper in the future."

"Larger clinical studies with artesunate that aim to provide well tolerated and convenient anticancer regimens should be implemented with urgency, and may provide an intervention where none is currently available, as well as synergistic benefits with current treatment regimens," added Professor Devinder Kumar, a leading expert in colorectal cancer at St George's and joint-lead of this study.

For most patients globally, access to advanced treatments is difficult as they are too expensive to be widely available, or associated with significant morbidity thereby further compromising their survival.

"In the St George's study, patients were examined and then were given either the anti-malaria drug artesunate or a placebo. After 42 months following surgery, there were six recurrences of cancer in the placebo group (of 12 patients) and one recurrence in an artesunate recipient (of 10 patients). The survival beyond two years in the artesunate group was estimated at 91% whilst surviving the first recurrence of [cancer](#) in the placebo group was only 57%.

This is the first randomized, double blind study to test the anti-CRC properties of oral [artesunate](#). The anticancer properties of artemisinins have been seen in the laboratory previously but this is the first time their effect has been seen in [patients](#) in a rigorously designed study.

More information: Sanjeev Krishna, Senthil Ganapathi, Irina Chis Ster, Mohamed E.M. Saeed, Matt Cowan, Caroline Finlayson, Hajnalka Kovacsevics, Herwig Jansen, Peter G. Kremsner, Thomas Efferth, Devinder Kumar, "A Randomised, Double Blind, Placebo-Controlled Pilot Study of Oral Artesunate Therapy for Colorectal Cancer," *EBioMedicine*, Available online 15 November 2014, ISSN 2352-3964,

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