

Could a green sponge hold cancer-fighting secrets?

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A small green sponge, photographed by an ROV camera, seen in the waters off the coast of Alaska

A small green sponge discovered in dark, icy waters of the Pacific off Alaska could be the first effective weapon against pancreatic cancer, researchers said on Wednesday.

Pancreatic [cancer](#), with particularly aggressive tumors, is notoriously difficult to treat.

"One would never have imagined looking at this sponge that it could be miraculous," Bob Stone, a researcher at the NOAA Alaska Fisheries Science Center, said in a briefing by phone.

Stone discovered the sponge, dull in color, called "Latrunculia austini" in 2005 while on a seabed exploration expedition in Alaska.

It lives on rocks in patches at depths of 230-720 feet (70-219m).

Lab testing has shown that several molecules in this sponge selectively destroy [pancreatic cancer](#) cells, said Mark Hamann, a University of South Carolina researcher working with Fred Valeriote of the Henry Ford Cancer Institute in Detroit.

"This is undoubtedly the most active molecule against [pancreatic](#) cancer that we see," said Hamann. "Although there is still much work to be done, it marks the first key step in the discovery and process of developing a treatment," he said.

Pancreatic cancer progresses slowly, a circumstance which leaves patients in a tough position as late diagnosis means little chance for successful treatment.

Patients' chances of survival at five years for this tumor are only 14%, according to the American Cancer Society.

"I've looked at 5,000 sponge extracts over the last two decades," Valeriote said. "In terms of this particular pattern of pancreatic and ovarian cancer selective activity, we've only seen one (other) sponge with such activity, and that was one collected many years ago in Indonesia."

In the United States, 53,670 new cases of pancreatic cancer will be diagnosed in 2017 and more than 43,000 people will die.

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