Pfizer says COVID-19 pill cut hospital, death risk by 90%

6 November 2021, by Matthew Perrone

This 2020 electron microscope image provided by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases - Rocky Mountain Laboratories shows SAR...
and lasted for five days. Patients who received the drug earlier showed slightly better results, underscoring the need for speedy testing and treatment.

Pfizer reported few details on side effects but said rates of problems were similar between the groups at about 20%.

An independent group of medical experts monitoring the trial recommended stopping it early, standard procedure when interim results show such a clear benefit. The data have not yet been published for outside review, the normal process for vetting new medical research.

Top U.S. health officials continue to stress that vaccination will remain the best way to protect against infection. But with tens of millions of adults still unvaccinated—and many more globally—effective, easy-to-use treatments will be critical to curbing future waves of infections.

The FDA has set a public meeting later this month to review Merck's pill, known as molnupiravir. The company reported in September that its drug cut rates of hospitalization and death by 50%. Experts warned against comparing preliminary results because of differences in the studies, including where they were conducted and what types of variants were circulating.

"It's too early to say who won the hundred meter dash," Mellors said. "There's a big difference between 50% and 90% but we need to make sure the populations were comparable."

Although Merck's pill is further along in the U.S. regulatory process, Pfizer's drug could benefit from a safety profile that is more familiar to regulators with fewer red flags. While pregnant women were excluded from the Merck trial due to a potential risk of birth defects, Pfizer's drug did not have any similar restrictions. The Merck drug works by interfering with the coronavirus' genetic code, a novel approach to disrupting the virus.

Pfizer's drug is part of a decades-old family of antiviral drugs known as protease inhibitors, which revolutionized the treatment of HIV and hepatitis C. The drugs block a key enzyme which viruses need to multiply in the human body.

The drug was first identified during the SARS outbreak originating in Asia during 2003. Last year, company researchers decided to revive the medication and study it for COVID-19, given the similarities between the two coronaviruses.

The U.S. has approved one other antiviral drug for COVID-19, remdesivir, and authorized three antibody therapies that help the immune system fight the virus. But they have to be given by IV or injection at hospitals or clinics, and limited supplies were strained by the last surge of the delta variant.

Shares in New York-based Pfizer Inc. gained 11% to close at $48.61 on Friday.

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