What Doctors Don't Tell You

Can Ivermectin cure cancer?

An avid social media scroller? Or do you perhaps tune in to the Joe Rogan podcast? If you do either, you'll have heard about ivermectin, the de-wormer that is now being touted as a cure for cancer.

The idea has been circulating on social media platforms ever since Hollywood star Mel Gibson appeared on the Joe Rogan podcast last year and announced that several of his friends' cancers had been reversed by the drug. Go back a few years, and ivermectin was being promoted as a cure for Covid-19.

But what have parasites got to do with cancer? In a tangential way, quite a lot: some cancers could be started by an infection, and researchers are also working on the idea that parasites could be harnessed as a cure.

The idea that ivermectin could treat cancer isn't new. Scientists have been investigating its cancer-fighting qualities for more than 30 years. Although it was approved in 1987 to treat worm and parasite infections in people, researchers have been finding that the broad-spectrum antiparasitic has the potential to interfere with the internal communication systems of malignant cells. Laboratory tests appear to prove the theory.

One study, published in the influential Nature journal, discovered that the drug caused cell death in a line of breast cancer cells, and even targeted those that were causing the tumour to spread. The researchers from Beckman Research Institute also found that ivermectin was affecting secondary tumors.

Parasites can also cause—and treat—cancer. Chronic infection from worms (helminths) can start the cancer cycle by causing inflammation and tissue damage, and organisms like Schistosoma haematobium and liver flukes are recognized carcinogens. Conversely, some parasite-derived molecules are being harnessed to modulate immune responses to fight tumors.

But the focus of late has been on ivermectin, and yet, say sceptics, research has never stepped beyond the test tube to demonstrate that it can work in cancer patients. That is, until now. A new review has tested the effectiveness of ivermectin—taken with mebendazole, another antiparasitic that treats intestinal worm infections like threadworms, roundworms, and hookworms—on 197 cancer patients.

The patients, with an average age of 67 and a variety of different cancers, were given capsules containing 25 mg ivermectin and 250 mg mebendazole for six months. Before starting the ivermectin treatment, they had an average life expectancy of just over a year, and 37 percent had aggressive cancers that were spreading.

A research team from the McCullough Foundation in Dallas, Texas reported an overall clinical benefit ratio of 84 percent; in other words, the vast majority saw some noticeable benefit. Nearly half either saw their cancer regress, and some even reported that their symptoms had completely disappeared. The disease stabilised in more than 30 percent of the patients, and the cancer had worsened in around 16 percent of patients.

Mainstream medicine has started to put a toe into ivermectin waters. Although America's drug regulator the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is opposed to 'off label' use as a cancer therapy, the US's National Cancer institute (NCI) has this year announced it will carry out preclinical trials with cancer patients. The initiative has been launched by NCI director Anthony Letai to bridge the chasm between "intense public interest" and reliable studies.

The NCI may be helped by researchers in China who think they have worked out why ivermectin could fight cancer. A research team from Bengbu Medical College in Anhui Province have discovered that it has "powerful antitumor effects, including the inhibition of proliferation, metastasis, and angiogenic activity" for a variety of cancers. It interferes with the tumour's signaling pathways by interacting with PAK1 kinase, a protein that keeps cells alive. Ivermectin also promotes apoptosis, the immune system's messaging system that tells cells to die, and inhibits tumour stem cells from developing, while supercharging the effectiveness of standard cancer therapies.

Some of you of a certain age may recall the work of Canadian naturopath Hulda Clark who, during the 1990s, was claiming that parasites were the cause of all cancers; she called out the flatworm, or giant intestinal fluke, Fasciolopsis buski, as the main culprit.

It's true she overplayed her hand, but it's clear she was on to something. She died in 2009, and so wasn't around to hear Mel Gibson give some vindication of her theory.

The worm turns indeed.

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