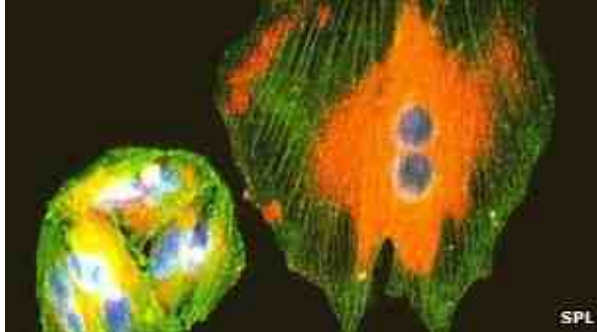


23 February 2012 Last updated at 02:19 GMT

Skin cancer drug hopes raised by study

By Helen Briggs Health editor, BBC News website



Melanoma is aggressive and dangerous
A new treatment for advanced skin cancer almost doubles survival times, according to an international study.

Doctors say 132 patients in the US and Australia who were given the drug vemurafenib gained several extra months of life.

Research in the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) found those in the study lived an average of 16 months, compared with nine months on conventional treatment.

Vemurafenib (Zelboraf) has been approved for use in Europe.

The treatment is one of two drugs for late-stage melanoma, approved on fast-track in the US last year, which offer hope for patients with advanced melanoma.

Before that, there had been no new drugs for the cancer for more than a decade.

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Malignant melanoma

- Melanoma, also called malignant melanoma, is a type of skin cancer that is aggressive and dangerous
- Melanoma is relatively rare and makes up 10% of all skin cancer cases
- Melanoma is responsible for most deaths due to skin cancer
- About 2,000 people die every year in England and Wales from melanoma
- The main cause of melanoma is believed to be over-exposure to the sun
- Over using sunbeds and sun lamps may also increase the risk of developing melanoma

Vemurafenib is suitable for about half of patients with advanced melanoma as it targets tumours that express a certain gene mutation.

Dr Antoni Ribas, a professor of haematology/oncology and a researcher at the Jonsson Cancer Center at the University of California-Los Angeles, said: "This study shows that Zelboraf changes the natural history of this disease. This data is beyond what I would have expected.

"We're seeing a significant number of patients with durable responses to the drug, and that the whole group of treated patients is living longer.

"These results tell us that this drug is having a very big impact, and this changes the way we treat metastatic melanoma."

According to the European Medicines Agency, the drug has been recommended for approval in Europe, pending final authorisation by the European Commission.

Elizabeth Woolf, head of Cancer Research UK's information website Cancer Help UK, said: "This is an interesting, impressive but relatively small trial of a promising new-generation melanoma drug, which Cancer Research UK is proud to have played a role in developing."

But she said there were still questions that remain unanswered, not least the cost.

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“Start Quote

We're getting somewhere with these targeted drugs but we have a whole raft of research still to do address the issue of resistance”

Kate Law Cancer Research UK

"Everyone on the trial had the drug, so we cannot tell how large the benefits are, compared to people who didn't have it, or had another treatment. And because the drug targets a particular gene fault, only half of all melanoma patients are eligible.

"About half of those treated seem to benefit, so it could potentially help roughly a quarter of patients with advanced melanoma overall.

"Looking at these uncertainties, and now that the drug is available to UK cancer patients, it will be interesting to see what price the manufacturer charges so as not to place too great a strain on already scarce NHS resources."

Drug resistance

Cancer Research UK said once the drug was licensed in Europe, patients would be able to discuss treatment options with their doctor.

In England, patients will have to apply to the Cancer Drugs Fund, the charity said.

Kate Law, director of clinical and population research at Cancer Research UK, said the treatment was one of a new generation of cancer drugs targeted at patients with a specific genetic make-up.

While it offered hope, she said, it was not a cure as the cancer eventually became resistant to the drug.

She told the BBC: "This is not a cure - you're talking an extra six months of life.

"We're getting somewhere with these targeted drugs but we have a whole raft of research still to do to address the issue of resistance."