

Coronavirus treatment

Cheap antiparasitic could cut chance of Covid-19 deaths by up to 75%

Researchers hail ivermectin findings but say more studies needed on using drug



While the race to find safe and effective vaccines has yielded a number of approved candidates, the quest for effective treatments for Covid-19 has lagged behind © Bloomberg

Donato Paolo Mancini JANUARY 19 2021

A cheap, off-patent antiparasitic drug has been shown to have a significant effect in reducing mortality in patients with moderate to severe Covid-19.

Researchers have hailed the preliminary finding as a pivotal step towards broadening the arsenal of drugs used against the disease.

The University of Liverpool's Andrew Hill and others carried out a meta-analytical breakdown of 18 studies that [found](#) that ivermectin was associated with reduced inflammation and a faster elimination of Sars-Cov-2, the virus that causes Covid-19.

In six of these trials, the risk of death was reduced by 75 per cent in a subset of patients with moderate to severe Covid-19.

The only antiviral with some sort of approval globally to treat Covid-19 is Gilead Sciences' [remdesivir](#), which has shown some benefit in shortening hospital stays but no clear-cut effect on mortality or viral loads, a measure of how much virus circulates in a patient's blood stream.

Ivermectin is technically not an antiviral, though these results suggest that the drug may enjoy antiviral properties. It is usually used to treat lice and scabies infestations as well as more serious parasites such as river blindness.

Dr Hill said the ivermectin results were encouraging, but further studies were needed to provide global regulators with evidence robust enough to warrant approvals.

“It’s a generic drug used all over the world. It costs 12 cents to make the drug substance. The drug costs \$3 in India, \$960 in the US,” Dr Hill told the Financial Times.

The drug could make it harder for people to be infected and it could be harder for those with the disease to infect anyone else, the researchers have posited.

“If people testing positive for Covid-19 are treated immediately with a drug which clears the virus quickly, this might make them less infectious,” Dr Hill said. “This ‘treatment as prevention’ strategy works for HIV and should now be tested for Covid-19.”

“The purpose of this report is to forewarn people that this is coming: get prepared, get supplies, get ready to approve it,” Dr Hill said. “We need to be ready.”

Ivermectin is not approved in the UK and is usually imported from France. But researchers were adamant that many of the studies that had been looked at had not been peer-reviewed and that meta-analyses, which look at many studies at once, could be prone to errors.

While the race to find safe and effective vaccines has yielded a number of approved candidates and some countries have begun large-scale vaccination campaigns, the quest for effective treatments for Covid-19 has lagged behind. Researchers have mostly focused on preventing hospitalisation and reducing death rates for those who become critically ill and end up in hospital.

“Vaccination is central to the response to the epidemic,” Dr Hill said. “But this might help reduce infection rates by making people less infectious and it might reduce death rates by treating the viral infection.”