

Breast cancer drug everolimus 'biggest advance in years'

A new breast cancer drug that has the potential to extend the lives of women with advanced disease by months is being hailed as “one of the biggest advances in years”.

Breast cancer cell Photo: ALAMY



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By Stephen Adams, Medical Correspondent

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Up to 8,000 women a year could benefit from everolimus, say specialists, after a trial indicated it could "stall" advanced cancer for about four months longer than persisting with the same treatment.

About 12,000 women die of advanced breast cancer - where it has spread to other organs - every year.

Three in four women with advanced breast cancer have a form of the disease that is spurred on by the female sex hormone oestrogen.

Many drugs try to block cancer cells from taking up oestrogen or lowering hormone levels, thereby slowing or stopping tumour growth.

However, in time cancer cells work out how to negate the effects of the drugs, become resistant, and tumour growth resumes. Chemotherapy, which can have extremely debilitating side-effects, is usually then the only option.

Everolimus, marketed by Novartis under the brand name Afinitor, is intended for post-menopausal women whose cancers have developed resistance to 'hormonal' treatments.

It works by targeting other proteins in cancer cell, which control how it works and grows.

The drug is so recent that trial results, comparing 485 women given the drug and 239 given a dummy pill, are still coming out. However, after 18 months the differences are already marked.

Among those given a dummy pill and exemestane, which helps prevent oestrogen uptake, tumour growth was stalled by 3.2 months on average. But among those given everolimus and exemestane, it was 7.8 months.

Professor Stephen Johnston of The Royal Marsden Hospital in London, said the impact was so large that it was "changing the natural history of the disease".

He described everolimus as potentially the most significant breakthrough for advanced breast cancer since the discovery of drugs that lower oestrogen levels, in the mid 1990s.

Estimating it could help up to 8,000 women a year, he said: "Everolimus has the potential to redefine the way this common form of advanced breast cancer is treated, and importantly offers women an effective alternative to a chemotherapy regime".

There are possible side effects, notably inflammation of mouth tissue, rash, tiredness and diarrhoea.

But Dr Rachel Greig, of the charity Breakthrough Breast Cancer, said the drug was an exciting development.

She said: "Everolimus is one of the biggest advances in breast cancer treatment in many years.

"This drug could make a massive difference to thousands of patients with advanced breast cancer.

"While this is by no means a cure, it could give patients several extra months of good quality of life with their families.

"Everolimus needs to be assessed by Nice but we are strongly backing it to be made available for those who need it."

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