

Experimental drug trial seeks to improve treatment for head and neck cancer

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Credit: Cancer Research UK

A trial to test an experimental drug in patients with head and neck cancer launches in the UK today (Friday), through the Combinations Alliance – a joint initiative between Cancer Research UK and the Experimental Cancer Medicine Centres (ECMC) Network.

Researchers want to find out whether using Astra Zeneca's AZD1775

experimental compound, in combination with chemotherapy before surgery or with chemotherapy and radiotherapy after surgery, is more effective and reduces the risk of the cancer returning.

They also want to find out if the combination of AZD1775 and chemotherapy before surgery decreases the need for further treatment after surgery.

The phase 1 trial will determine whether it is safe to combine AZD1775 with pre-surgery cisplatin chemotherapy and post-surgery cisplatin chemotherapy and radiotherapy in patients with head and neck cancer, and what dose is best. AZD1775 acts as a potent inhibitor of WEE1, a protein which regulates the cell cycle, and it has been shown to increase the effectiveness of both cisplatin chemotherapy and radiotherapy in pre-clinical studies. It is one of AstraZeneca's portfolio of DNA Damage Response compounds.

There will be two groups of up to 21 patients taking part in the trial coordinated by the Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit at the University of Birmingham. The first group will receive AZD1775 with chemotherapy before surgery and the second will receive AZD1775 in addition to chemotherapy and radiotherapy after surgery.

Standard treatment for high-risk head and neck cancer is surgery followed by cisplatin chemotherapy and radiotherapy. While this treatment is the most effective option for patients, survival is still poor and the treatment often has a significant impact on quality of life for survivors.

Professor Hisham Mehanna, chief investigator of the trial based at the Institute of Cancer and Genomic Studies at the University of Birmingham, said: "Many patients diagnosed with aggressive types of head and neck cancer are at a high risk of relapse after surgery, so we

urgently need to find new ways to treat the disease and reduce the risk of it returning.

"We hope that combining this drug with chemotherapy will mean that treatment is more effective helping more people survive, and that those cured will have a better quality of life after treatment."

Anthony Johnson, VP Early Clinical Development, Innovative Medicines and Early Development Biotech Unit at AstraZeneca, said: "We are excited about this new clinical trial evaluating AZD1775 in combination with [chemotherapy](#) and radiation in head and neck cancer patients. There is a strong scientific rationale for running this trial and we hope that this will bring clinical benefit to patients."

Researchers on this window-of-opportunity trial are accepting treatment naïve patients between the age of 18 and 70 with [cancer](#) of the mouth, throat and voice box and are due to undergo [surgery](#).

Dr Ian Walker, Cancer Research UK's director of clinical research, said: "We're excited to have the opportunity to trial this new drug through our Combinations Alliance initiative. The initiative allows us to bring together combinations of treatments, using drugs that are in development, that wouldn't otherwise be possible. And we look forward to seeing if this drug can improve [treatment](#) options for [patients](#) with head and [neck cancer](#)."

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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