

Curry spice may help cancer fight



Turmeric is a spice used in many Indian dishes

A spice used in curry may help prevent people from developing cancer of the gullet, researchers in Swansea believe.

Some patients at Morriston Hospital in the city at risk from oesophageal cancer will be given curcumin tablets. It follows laboratory trials at Swansea University that showed the compound found in turmeric blocked a protein that helped the disease develop.

Scientists have long suspected some elements of Indian food may act as anti-cancer agents.

People in India have much lower incidence rates of certain gastro-intestinal (GI) tract cancers than other parts of the world, suggesting that diets rich in spices such as turmeric may prevent some cancers.

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Dr Gareth Jenkins

During the past 18 months researchers at Swansea University's Institute of Life Science have been testing the effects of curcumin on cultured cancer cells.

Data showed it inhibited the activity of NF-kappaB, a protein linked to several cancers of the GI tract.

The study has been led by Professor John Baxter and Dr

Gareth Jenkins.



Doctors in Swansea will involve around 50 patients in the study

Dr Jenkins said: "In India they have lower rates of certain cancers and it has always been assumed there was something in the Indian diet that is protecting them.

"Research all over the world has been looking at different Indian spices for quite some time."

Improve treatment

He explained some patients who attended Morriston Hospital for observation after being identified as being at high risk of developing cancer of the gullet would be given curcumin supplements.

"We are taking the research one step further by asking some patients to take curcumin tablets," he said.

"What we are hypothesising is if curcumin is effective in blocking NF-kappaB there may be a way preventing people developing oesophageal cancer."

Around 40 to 50 people will take part in the two-year pilot study.

Dr Jenkins stressed that even if the tablets proved successful in blocking the cancer promoting protein there were many other factors at work.

"Whether it will have a dramatic effect on them is yet to be proved," he said.

But he added it was hoped that in the foreseeable future with more information treatment for the prevention of GI tract

cancers would be improved.

"These sorts of cancers are on the increase in the UK and the western world," he said.

Popular curry spice is a brain booster

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Call it yellow ginger, haldi, turmeric or E100, the yellow root of *Curcuma longa*, a staple ingredient in curry, is turning out to be gratifyingly healthy. Now Tze-Pin Ng and colleagues at the National University of Singapore have discovered that curry eating seems to boost brain power in elderly people.

Curcumin, a constituent of turmeric, is an antioxidant, and reports have suggested that it inhibits the build-up of amyloid plaques in people with Alzheimer's. Ng's team looked at the curry-eating habits of 1010 Asian people unaffected by Alzheimer's and aged between 60 and 93, and compared their performance in a standard test of cognitive function, the Mini Mental State Examination. Those people who consumed curry "occasionally" (once or more in 6 months but less than once a month) and "often" (more than once a month) had better MMSE results than those who only ate curry "never or rarely" (*American Journal of Epidemiology*, DOI: 10.1093/aje/kwj267).

"What is remarkable is that apparently one needs only to consume curry once in a while for the better cognitive performance to be evidenced," says Ng, who says he wants to confirm the results, possibly in a controlled clinical trial comparing curcumin and a placebo.

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