Deadliest lung cancer breakthrough

A new pill that could cure one of the most lethal forms of cancer is being developed by scientists.

By Richard Alleyne, Science Correspondent
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British researchers have found that a drug destroys tumours in a form of inoperable lung cancer that kills more than nine out of 10 sufferers.

The treatment works by blocking the growth of the cancer cells and eventually causing them to self destruct.

In more than 50 per cent of the trials, the treatment, which appears to have no side affects, killed all traces of the disease.

"We are very excited about it," said Professor Michael Seckl, the molecular oncologist who led the study at Imperial College London.

"If you get diagnosed with this cancer your chances of surviving are very small. Over the last 30 years we have made very little progress in its treatment.

"This is why this is so exciting. It is pretty unusual to see a drug that makes these tumours completely disappear."

More than 34,000 people die each year from lung cancer in the United Kingdom, the heaviest death toll of any cancer.

One in five lung cancer sufferers have a particularly virulent strain called small cell lung cancer which kills all but three per cent of sufferers within five years of diagnoses.

With this form of lung cancer, tumours spread quickly so it is rarely possible to remove the tumours surgically. Because of this, small cell lung cancer is treated with chemotherapy.

Initially, the treatment often appears to work, reducing the size of the tumours. However, the tumours usually grow back rapidly and then become resistant to further treatment.

The researchers behind the new study published in the journal Cancer Research have identified a drug that, in half of the mice treated, was able to completely shrink tumours away.

It was also able to stop tumours from growing back and it helped other forms of chemotherapy to work more effectively.

If the drug proves successful in humans, the researchers hope that it could help patients with this kind of lung cancer to live longer with five to 10 years.

Prof Seckl said: "I have been working on small cell lung cancer for many years and to find
something that can take a measurable piece of tumour and make it go away is wonderful.

"Lung cancer is the most common cancer killer in the world and over 100 people in the UK are diagnosed with the disease every day.

"Although it responds to chemotherapy initially, the tumours soon become resistant to treatment and sadly nearly all people with the disease do not survive."

Dr Joanna Owens, Cancer Research UK's science information manager, said: "It's encouraging to see potential new drugs for lung cancer in the initial stages of development.

"The early results from this study are impressive but we'll need to wait for the results of clinical trials before we'll know if the drugs could work for patients."