New asthma pill could prove a 'game-changer'

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The first new asthma pill in decades has produced promising results in a small clinical trial, potentially paving the way for another treatment option for patients by the end of the decade.

Fevipiprant, which is being developed by Novartis, reduced a biological marker of asthma nearly five-fold in the 12-week trial involving 61 patients, researchers said on Saturday. No serious adverse events were reported.

Larger and longer studies are now needed to prove that the twice-daily pill can also reduce severe asthma attacks, known as exacerbations.

Novartis believes the medicine could be filed for regulatory approval in around 2019.

Pills for asthma used to be standard treatment 40 or 50 years ago, but those older products were often associated with worrying side effects.

The Novartis pill works in a very precise way to block the action of inflammatory cells called eosinophils. The latest research, published in the journal Lancet Respiratory Medicine, comes at a time of considerable innovation in asthma care with the recent launch of new injectable drugs for severe asthma that also target eosinophils.

At the same time, many drugmakers are developing improved asthma inhalers, including "smart" devices with sensors that monitor use. "This new drug could be a game-changer for future treatment of asthma," said Chris Brightling, a professor at the University of Leicester, central England, who led the study. Asthma is a long-term disease in which the immune system in the airways goes into overdrive, and wheezing, coughing and restricted breathing are the result.

People with chronic asthma can prevent or ease the symptoms by using an inhaler or steroids, but these can have hefty side effects.

Fevipiprant seeks to prevent immune cells called eosinophils from moving into the bronchial walls, where they restrict and inflame the airways. "We already know that using treatments to target eosinophilic airway inflammation can substantially reduce asthma attacks," Brightling said in a statment.