

Turmeric and cancer

Turmeric is promoted as an alternative cancer treatment. There is some evidence that curcumin, a substance in turmeric, can kill cancer cells in certain cancers. But we need more research.

Summary

- Turmeric is a spice grown in many Asian countries.
- Research on curcumin as a cancer treatment is ongoing.
- It may have side effects if taken in large amounts.

What is turmeric?

Turmeric is also known as Indian saffron, jiang huang, haridra and haldi. It is a spice grown in many Asian countries. It belongs to the ginger family and is a main ingredient of curry powder. The scientific name for turmeric is *Curcuma longa*.

The main active ingredient in turmeric is curcumin or diferuloyl methane. Laboratory studies have shown curcumin has anti cancer effects on cancer cells.

Why people with cancer use it

Some laboratory studies on cancer cells have shown that curcumin has anti cancer effects. It seems to be able to kill cancer cells and prevent more from growing.

Curcumin is being looked at in clinical trials and some of the results have been promising. Larger studies are needed.

At the moment there is no clear evidence in humans to show that turmeric or curcumin can prevent or treat cancer.

How you have it

Turmeric can be taken raw, as a powder, a paste or extract. It is also available as an oil.

Side effects of turmeric

It is important to remember that turmeric used in cooking is very safe. But we don't know how safe curcumin is when used for medical reasons. So far, research studies seem to show that it causes few or no side effects. But we don't know much about the side effects of taking it in large amounts to treat or prevent cancer.

People have reported stomach pain when eating too much turmeric. They have also reported skin problems when taking it for a long time. So, if you use curcumin for reasons other than cooking, talk to your doctor first.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has warned against Fortodol (also sold as Miradin). It is a turmeric-based food supplement, containing other ingredients.

Fortodol contains the strong anti-inflammatory drug nimesulide. Nimesulide can cause severe damage to the liver. The signs include:

- yellowing skin (jaundice)
- dark urine
- feeling or being sick
- unusual tiredness
- stomach or abdominal pain
- loss of appetite

It does not have a licence as a medicine in the UK. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) in the USA states that products with unknown amounts of nimesulide could be very harmful.

Research into curcumin for cancer

Several studies have looked into whether curcumin could be a cancer treatment. These have had some promising results.

One of these in 2013 was an international laboratory study on bowel cancer cells. It looked at the effects of combined treatment with curcumin and chemotherapy. The researchers concluded that the combined treatment might be better than chemotherapy alone.

A problem highlighted by a number of review studies is that curcumin does not get absorbed easily. This makes it work less well as a treatment. Researchers are looking at ways of overcoming this problem.

There have been some clinical trials looking at curcumin in people with colorectal cancer, prostate cancer and other cancer types. The studies were small and there were limitations to the trials.

Curcumin was well tolerated in those that took it. There was some evidence that curcumin may have an anti-inflammatory effect in the body. Although some of the results look promising, they do not give enough evidence to say curcumin is an effective treatment for cancer. More studies are needed and with larger numbers of people.

Curcumin for a sore mouth (mucositis) during cancer treatment

A [systematic review](#) in 2019 looked at curcumin given topically (gel or mouthwash) to people with head and neck cancer who were having chemotherapy and radiotherapy. They wanted to see if curcumin could help treat or prevent [mucositis](#). Curcumin did delay mucositis, reduced pain and seemed to speed up wound healing. More studies are needed so that we can compare the results.

How much it costs

Fortodol and Miradin are available in the UK and on the internet as food supplements. The FSA advises anyone taking these products to stop doing so immediately. They should contact their doctor if they have any signs of liver disease.

Do not believe information on the internet not backed up by research. And don't pay for any alternative cancer therapy on the internet.

[Read more about the cost of complementary and alternative therapies.](#)

A word of caution

It is understandable that you might want to try anything if you think it might help treat or cure your cancer. Only you can decide whether to use an alternative cancer therapy such as turmeric.

You could harm your health if you stop your cancer treatment for an unproven treatment.