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DIZZY WITH CHOICE

## THE INDEPENDENT

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### Herbal remedy shown to have anti-cancer effect

By Jeremy Laurance, Health Editor

A widely used herbal supplement taken to aid digestion has been found to have powerful anti-cancer properties. Triphala, made from the dried and powdered fruit of three plants, is the most popular Ayurvedic remedy in India. It is used to stimulate the appetite, treat intestinal disorders and act as a laxative.

Indian scientists have claimed for years that Triphala has value as a detoxifying and anti-cancer agent. Now researchers at the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute say they have shown that it can prevent or slow the growth of pancreatic cancer tumours implanted in mice.

Millions of cancer patients turn to herbal supplements and vitamin pills in the hope that they can boost their immune systems and help fight the disease. Many take them out of disaffection with conventional medicine but doctors warn that exaggerated claims are being made for their effects.

The latest findings, presented to the annual meeting of the American Association of Cancer Research in Los Angeles yesterday, suggest some herbal preparations may have genuine anti-cancer action.

Mice grafted with human pancreatic tumours were fed one to two milligrams of Triphala for five days a week. By the end of the study, their tumours were half the size of those in a control group of mice fed saline (salt solution) only.

Sanjay Srivastava, the assistant professor in pharmacology who led the study, said: "We discovered that Triphala fed orally to mice ... was an extremely effective inhibitor of the cancer process. Triphala triggered the cancerous cells to die off and significantly reduced the size of tumours without causing any side effects."

Pancreatic cancer is the fifth leading cause of cancer death and is one of the most aggressive cancers.

The study found that the herbal remedy caused the pancreatic cells to die through the process known as apoptosis - the body's normal method of disposing of damaged or unwanted cells. Apoptosis is often disrupted in cancer cells with the result that they continue to replicate and grow, forming a tumour.

In a separate study published yesterday, researchers in the UK revealed that Chinese herbs can help women with breast cancer. A review of seven randomised trials involving 542 women with breast cancer found that the herbal preparations can successfully counteract the side effects of chemotherapy. The report from the Cochrane Library, which systematically reviews research findings, says 60 per cent of women experience side effects from chemotherapy, ranging from nausea and vomiting to inflammation of the gut lining and decreased numbers of red and white blood cells.

Interest in traditional Chinese medicine is growing in the West while it is declining in China. But doctors warn that many herbal remedies are untested in trials and can interact with conventional medicines in unexpected and sometimes dangerous ways.

Edzard Ernst, the professor complementary medicine at the Peninsula Medical School of the Universities of Exeter and Plymouth, said therapies such as massage, aromatherapy, reflexology and relaxation could improve the quality of life of cancer patients and some, such as acupuncture for the nausea caused by chemotherapy, could combat its ill effects. But others, marketed as cures, were dangerous. "Several of

these alleged cures are associated with significant risks, including ... contamination [and] interaction with prescribed drugs," he said.

### **An aid to digestion**

In India, the capacity for the Ayurvedic remedy Triphala to care for the internal organs of the body is compared to a mother's care for her children. A popular folk saying is : "No mother? Don't worry so long as you have Triphala."


Triphala is a combination of equal parts of amalaki (*Emblica officinalis*), bibhitaki (*Terminalia belerica*), and haritaki (*Terminalia chebula*). It is taken with water and is said to combine nutritional and cleansing actions. It works as a gentle laxative and boosts red blood cells and removes fat from the body. It is also claimed to clear headaches, maintain normal blood sugar levels, and improve skin tone and colour.

Each of the three herbal fruits from which Triphala is made is said to take care of the body by "gently promoting internal cleansing of all conditions of stagnation and excess" while at the same time improving digestion and assimilation.

Several reports from Indian universities have suggested that Triphala can reduce tumour incidence and promote cancer cell death. Antioxidant studies conducted at the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Mumbai revealed that all three constituents of Triphala are active.

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