

# Breast cancers vanish in 11 days after 'mind-boggling' therapy

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Cancer patients have had their tumours disappear in days thanks to an "astonishing" combination therapy.

Doctors were amazed to see breast cancers wiped out 11 days after women were given two existing drugs, in "ground-breaking" findings that offer hope to thousands of patients.

Many patients could avoid gruelling chemotherapy and live longer after doctors found that about a quarter of women with an aggressive form of breast cancer were "exquisitely sensitive" to the combination treatment.

While cautioning that the findings would need to be confirmed before treatment was changed, scientists struggled yesterday to contain their excitement about one of the fastest known responses to treatment for the disease.

Nigel Bundred, a professor at the

University of Manchester, who led the study, said: "For solid tumours to disappear in 11 days is unheard of. These are mind-boggling results."

About 10,000 British women a year develop breast cancers where a faulty gene means tumour cells have too many HER2 receptors, key proteins in driving cell growth. After surgery many women are given drugs such as Herceptin, which blocks these receptors, alongside chemotherapy.

In a trial of 257 women British scientists aimed to find out what happened if such drugs were given in the days before surgery, comparing no treatment with Herceptin alone and Herceptin combined with another drug, lapatinib, which blocks HER2-positive cancers in a different way.

They were stunned to discover that in seven patients — 11 per cent of those given the combination — tumours van-

ished entirely. The largest tumour to disappear was about the size of a walnut.

David Cameron, a professor at the University of Edinburgh, said: "It was only when the pathologist was in the lab scratching around saying 'where is the tumour?' that it became apparent."

In a further 11 patients, 17 per cent of the sample, the tumour was only barely visible, scientists announced at the European Breast Cancer Conference in Amsterdam.

Professor Bundred said: "This has ground-breaking potential because it allows us to identify a group of patients who, within 11 days, have had their tumours disappear with anti-HER2 therapy alone and who potentially may not require subsequent chemotherapy. This offers the opportunity to tailor treatment for each individual woman."

He added: "These results are so staggering that I suspect that we will have to

run another trial to prove that they are generalisable."

While Herceptin is routinely available on the NHS, lapatinib, also known as Tyverb, is not. However, the drugs are usually given for six months to a year and Professor Cameron said it would be "dirt cheap" to give them for only 11 days. This would cost about £1,500 a patient.

Judith Bliss, a professor at the Institute of Cancer Research, London, who also worked on the study, said that the aim would now be to discover "in this group who are exquisitely sensitive to HER2 therapy, is it then possible to avoid the need for chemotherapy?" She added: "If you have this group that you really target you have the potential to improve outcomes."

Samia al Qadhi, chief executive of the Breast Cancer Care charity, said: "Although an early study, this has game-changing potential."