

Why are malaria pills being used against coronavirus?

Reuters

Older malaria drugs are being studied, and in some cases used, to treat or try to prevent infection with the new coronavirus, even though there is no firm evidence to show they are effective.

Studies are underway in a number of countries, including China, France and the United States, to see whether the pills - chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine - may have a role to play in the rapidly spreading pandemic.

US President Donald Trump has touted the malaria drugs as "a game changer." But the

and Drug Administration and other health experts said trials must first ensure the medicines are effective and safe for use in this patient population.

Why are malaria drugs under consideration?

There are currently no vaccines or US-approved treatments for the highly contagious COVID-19 respiratory illness that has killed more than 19,000 worldwide, so even the most severely ill patients largely receive only supportive care such as breathing assistance.

On its website, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says some US clinicians have reported anecdotal use of hydroxychloroquine at different doses.

Chloroquine was first synthesized in the 1930s. A version called hydroxychloroquine, in use since the 1950s, is considered to be less toxic, according to studies. Both drugs can cause serious side effects, including vision loss, heart problems or even death, if used incorrectly.

The drugs are used to combat malaria, which is caused by a parasite spread through mosquito bites, because they

interrupt its ability to digest a host's blood cells.

Scientists have detailed biochemical properties of chloroquine that indicate it could be used against some viral infections. These include direct antiviral effects, such as blocking steps needed by certain viruses to replicate, and its ability to suppress production and release of proteins involved in inflammatory complications of several viral diseases.

In addition to malaria, hydroxychloroquine is also used to treat lupus and rheumatoid arthritis.



Firefighters wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) walk away after responding to a medical call amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak in Seattle, Washington

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What does the data say?

Data has begun to emerge from some coronavirus trials, but most information so far is preliminary.

A French team last week said initial results from a 24-patient trial of hydroxychloroquine

showed that 25 per cent of patients given the drug still carried the coronavirus after six days, compared with 90pc of patients given a placebo. But the trial

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Health officials caution that no one should be taking these drugs to treat or prevent coronavirus infection without medical supervision and a prescription

people.

Other trials of the malaria drugs are ongoing or set to start in the United Kingdom, Norway and Thailand.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, whose state is the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak with more than 25,000 cases, on Sunday said it had acquired hundreds of thousands of doses of the malaria drugs to use in a clinical trial.

Is there enough to go around?

In the United States, prescriptions for chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine have already spiked and are in short supply, according to pharmacists.

Several makers of the generic medicines said they are increasing production of chloroquine pills. Teva Pharmaceuticals Industries Ltd, Mylan NV and Bayer AG have donated large quantities of the drugs to health authorities.

Prescription only!

Health officials caution that no one should be taking these drugs to treat or prevent coronavirus infection without medical supervision and a prescription.

In Arizona, a man died and his wife was hospitalized after taking a nonmedical form of chloroquine used to fight parasites in aquariums. "Given the uncertainty around COVID-19, we understand that people are trying to find new ways to prevent or treat this virus, but self-medicating is not the way to do so," said Dr. Daniel Brooks, medical director of the poison and drug information center at Arizona-based Banner Health.



Food



Chloroquine is a synthetic form of quinine, which is found on the bark of the cinchona plant. It has been used for hundreds of years in South America to treat fever

Sudan defence minister dies at Juba peace talks



Sudanese Defence Minister Jamal al-Din Omar

Khartoum

Sudanese Defence Minister Lieutenant General Jamal al-Din Omar died of an unspecified illness Wednesday while in neighbouring South Sudan for peace talks with his country's main rebel groups, the military announced.

Omar had "suffered from a number of chronic illnesses," armed forces spokesman Amer Mohamed al-Hassan said without elaborating.

The government delegation in the South Sudanese capital Juba said Omar died at 2:30 am (2330 GMT Tuesday) "after a sudden heart attack during the performance of his sacred duty".

Born in 1960, Omar was named defence minister after the armed forces toppled veteran president Omar Bashir in a palace coup last April following months of nationwide protests.

At least 25 dead in attack on Sikh-Hindu temple in Kabul

AFP | Kabul

At least 25 people were killed Wednesday in an attack on a Sikh-Hindu temple in Afghanistan's capital where worshippers were offering morning prayers, the latest brutal assault claimed by the Islamic State group.

The incident highlights the country's ongoing security crisis and comes as the impoverished nation reels from a massive cut in US aid and struggles with a raging insurgency, political deadlock, and rising coronavirus cases.

Witness Raju Singh Sonny said that a man dressed in a police uniform burst into the temple in central Kabul, shot a guard and started attacking worshippers in the main hall.

"Several other attackers also entered the building and they were going from room to room shooting people," Sonny said.

Only a few thousand Sikhs and Hindus are estimated to reside in what is an overwhelmingly Muslim nation.

Interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said the assault started around 7:45 am (0315 GMT). There were conflicting accounts about how many gunmen were involved, with security sources giving differing numbers between one and four.

At least one attacker was subsequently killed by security forces in an hours-long clearing operation.



An Afghan Sikh woman mourns for there relatives near the site of the attack in Kabul, Afghanistan



NATO soldiers inspect near the site of the attack in Kabul, Afghanistan

The Islamic State (IS) group claimed responsibility, according to the SITE intelligence group. The Taliban denied any involvement.

Anarkali Kaur Honaryar, a Sikh member of the Afghan parliament, told AFP about 150 people had been inside the temple, where several families also live and worshippers gather for

morning prayers.

"Some people inside the temple are hiding and their phones are off," Honaryar said while the attack was ongoing.

Arian said 25 civilians had been killed and eight others wounded, while 80 people had been rescued from the temple. Graphic images posted online showed several bodies as well as terrified people who appeared to be Sikhs running from the scene.

"Such cowardly attacks on the places of religious worship of the minority community, especially at this time of (the coronavirus) pandemic, is reflective of the diabolical mindset of the perpetrators and their backers," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement. Sikhism and Hinduism are rooted in India.

White House, Senate agree on \$2 trn coronavirus rescue plan

Washington

The White House and Senate have reached agreement on a \$2 trillion stimulus package for the US economy and millions of Americans ravaged by the coronavirus crisis, top lawmakers said early yesterday.

"At last, we have a deal," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said, hailing the massive "wartime level of investment into our nation" reached after five days of arduous and tense negotiations.

"We have a bipartisan agreement on the largest rescue package in American history," top Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer said shortly after McConnell spoke.

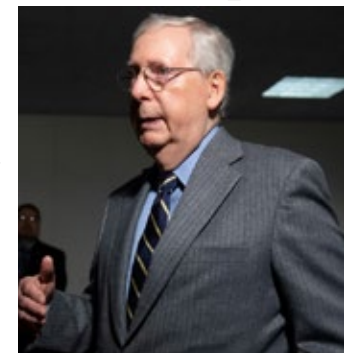
"So many people are being put out of work through no fault of their own. They don't know what their future is going to be like, how are they going to pay the bills," Schumer added.

"Well, we come to their rescue."

The Senate and House of Representatives still need to pass the legislation before sending it to President Donald Trump for his signature.

The deal aims to buttress the teetering economy by giving roughly \$2 trillion to health facilities, businesses and ordinary Americans buckling under the strain of the coronavirus pandemic.

It will put cash directly into the hands of Americans hard hit by the crisis, provide grants



Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell hailed the massive 'wartime level of investment into our nation'

to small businesses and hundreds of billions of dollars in loans for larger corporations including airlines.

It also proposes the injection of around \$130 billion into what Schumer calls "a Marshall Plan for hospitals" and health care infrastructure, referring to the huge American aid program to rebuild Europe after World War II.

Democrats rejected the original package, arguing that it put corporations ahead of workers, including health professionals on the front lines of the battle against a pandemic that has infected 55,000 and killed nearly 800 in the US alone.

As the hours ticked away Tuesday, several lawmakers voiced their anxiety.

"Pass the damn bill. Stop negotiating. Enough is enough," a visibly angry Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said on the floor, after accusing Democrats of "nickeling and diming at a time people are dying."