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Shark cartilage is not effective in treating cancer.

Since cartilage is a body tissue in which no blood vessels are present, researchers guessed that certain molecules isolated from shark cartilage could inhibit the growth of blood vessels. This action, called anti-angiogenesis, was seen when shark cartilage was directly applied to tumors in a test tube. However, when these extracts were given by mouth (how all over-the-counter shark cartilage supplements are taken), no anti-tumor effect occurred in mice or in humans. A purified shark cartilage product called Neovastat (AE-941) can reduce tumor size in animals. However, it did not improve survival in lung cancer patients.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To treat and prevent cancer
Studies in animals and humans do not support this use.
- To treat Kaposi sarcoma
There is one case report of regression of Kaposi sarcoma in a patient who took low-dose shark cartilage for a prolonged period.

There is no scientific evidence to support the following claims:

- To stimulate the immune system
- To reduce inflammation in conditions such as arthritis, osteoarthritis, hemorrhoids, colitis, and psoriasis
- For faster wound healing
- To reduce bone loss in osteoporosis
- To treat degenerative eye conditions such as glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetic retinopathy

What are the side effects?

- Gastrointestinal effects have been reported but are rare: Nausea, vomiting, upset stomach, constipation, diarrhea, and loss of appetite.
- Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) was reported in one patient with type II diabetes.
- Tell your doctor immediately if you develop the following symptoms: fever, jaundice (yellowing of the skin), nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and/or yellowing of the whites of the eyes. These may indicate serious liver problems.

What else do I need to know?

Special Point:

- Over-the-counter shark cartilage supplements contain varying amounts of shark cartilage. Some are composed mainly of fillers and may not have any biological activity. Furthermore, it is debated whether the large proteins responsible for shark cartilage's activity are absorbed through the gastrointestinal tract, or whether they are simply digested and rendered useless.
- The Federal Trade Commission has barred manufacturers from making unsupported health claims for their shark cartilage products.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Shark Cartilage - Last updated on February 23, 2023

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