

Kidney Cancer Study Finds Belzutifan Plus Pembrolizumab Post-Surgery Helps Patients Stay Cancer-Free Longer

Data from LITESPARK-022 study show Welireg plus Keytruda delays recurrence in people at high risk for recurrence after surgery.

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Patients with a common form of kidney cancer called clear cell renal cell carcinoma (ccRCC) who have a high risk of recurrence after surgery showed significantly improved disease-free survival when treated with an oral combination regimen that includes belzutifan [Welireg], a HIF-2 α inhibitor, given with standard immune therapy pembrolizumab [Keytruda].

These [findings](#), from the Phase III LITESPARK-022 study, [were] presented [February 28] by [Dr. Toni Choueiri](#) of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute at the [2026 American Society of Clinical Oncology Genitourinary Cancers Symposium](#) (ASCO GU) in San Francisco, California, from February 26-28.

Previous Dana-Farber research led by Dr. Choueiri showed that [pembrolizumab](#) alone reduced the risk of death and disease progression for advanced kidney cancer patients after surgery. Pembrolizumab is an immune checkpoint inhibitor that helps the immune system find and fight cancer cells. While effective, about one in five people who take it will relapse.

This study was designed to combine the immunotherapy with belzutifan to improve the current overall survival of patients considered high-risk for kidney cancer relapse.

“A significant percentage of patients with high risk kidney cancer will recur within five years after surgery because microscopic cancer cells can remain undetected,” says Dr. Choueiri, director of the [Lank Center for Genitourinary Cancer at Dana-Farber](#). “We need new therapies that can work together to better prevent the cancer from coming back.”

The HIF-2 α inhibitor belzutifan helps to reduce risk of progression by blocking HIF-2 α , which is overabundant in ccRCC cells and drives cancer growth. Dana-Farber’s [Dr. William G. Kaelin, Jr.](#), was awarded a [Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 2019](#) for the science behind the development of belzutifan.

LITESPARK-022 is a global, multicenter, double-blind, randomized, Phase III study that included

1,841 participants with ccRCC. Participating patients underwent surgery to remove the tumor and had no signs of cancer but had an elevated risk of recurrence. Patients were randomized to receive either pembrolizumab and belzutifan after surgery or pembrolizumab and a placebo after surgery.

With a median follow-up of 28.4 months, the combination of pembrolizumab plus belzutifan resulted in a 28% decrease in recurrence. About 81% of participants who took the two-drug regimen were cancer-free, compared to 74% of those who received standard of care. Side effects were consistent with data from previously reported studies. The study has not collected enough information yet to determine if adding belzutifan helps people live longer overall.

“People at high risk of ccRCC coming back after surgery may have a new option to reduce that risk,” says Dr. Choueiri. “In this study, belzutifan, in combination with pembrolizumab, reduces the chance of recurrence compared with the current standard treatment of pembrolizumab alone,” says Dr. Choueiri.

The trial is sponsored by Merck Sharp & Dohme, a subsidiary of Merck & Co.

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