

## WHO pauses trial of hydroxychloroquine, once touted by Trump as a ‘game changer,’ over safety concerns

By **Tim Elfrink**

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For months, President Trump has promoted hydroxychloroquine as a potential treatment for covid-19, calling the antimalarial drug a “game changer”; asking patients, “What do you have to lose?” — and even announcing that he was taking the drug in an attempt to ward off the novel coronavirus.

On Monday, however, the World Health Organization announced it had temporarily halted its global trial of the drug, citing a new study that found a significantly higher risk of death among those taking hydroxychloroquine or the closely related drug chloroquine.

“The Executive Group has implemented a temporary pause of the hydroxychloroquine arm within the Solidarity Trial while the safety data is reviewed by the Data Safety Monitoring Board,” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO’s director general, said in a briefing.

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Trump, meanwhile, said on Sunday that he is no longer taking hydroxychloroquine, but again defended the drug as a covid-19 treatment, pointing to “tremendous, rave reviews.”

“I believe in it enough that I took a program because I had two people in the White House that tested positive,” Trump told Sharyl Attkisson of the Sinclair Broadcast Group noting that his “two-week course” of the drug had recently finished.

“And by the way, I’m still here,” Trump added. “To the best of my knowledge, here I am.”

The WHO’s decision is the latest setback for backers of hydroxychloroquine, which has produced disappointing results in scientific studies. In April, the Food and Drug Administration warned against using the drug outside of hospitals and clinical trials over reports of “serious heart rhythm problems” linked to the drug’s use.

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On Friday, the medical journal Lancet published a study of 96,000 hospitalized covid-19 patients worldwide that found a 45 percent increased risk of death and a 411 percent increased risk of serious heart arrhythmias among those taking a cocktail of an antibiotic and the antimalarial drug.

“If there was ever hope for this drug, this is the death of it,” Eric Topol, a cardiologist and director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, told The Washington Post.

The WHO started a clinical trial earlier this year to test hydroxychloroquine along with three other experimental treatments. Due to the alarming findings published in the Lancet, Tedros<sup>AD</sup> said Monday, the use of hydroxychloroquine in the trial, which now has more than 3,500 patients in 17 countries, will temporarily halt.

The trial will continue for the other three drugs, and the WHO will probably decide within the next two weeks whether to resume using hydroxychloroquine, chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan told NPR.

This weekend, Trump continued to promote the drug.

The president had revealed earlier this month that he was taking hydroxychloroquine after one of his military valets and Vice President Pence's press secretary, Katie Miller, tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Asked by Attkisson whether it was appropriate for him to take the drug despite the official warnings, the president stood by his decision.

“Well, I've heard tremendous reports about it. Frankly, I've heard tremendous reports. Many people think it saved their lives. Doctors come out with reports,” he said, citing in particular an “incredible” study in France. (A study by French researcher Didier Raoult that helped fuel initial enthusiasm for hydroxychloroquine has since been discredited by scientists.)

Trump added, “Hydroxy has had tremendous, if you look at it, tremendous, rave reviews.”

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