

A pill for breast cancer? There's one for early-stage patients with aggressive cases — and it works

A drug sold by [AstraZeneca](#) and [Merck](#) & Co. reduced the recurrence of breast cancer in women with an early but aggressive form of the disease, a long-running international study found.

The finding, which on [June 3] was published online by the [New England Journal of Medicine](#) and released at a major cancer-research meeting, marked the latest advance in cancer treatments targeting the genetic traits of tumors. It could expand the arsenal of weapons against a hereditary form of breast cancer.

The result also helps validate the pharmaceutical industry's investment in a pricey new class of drugs that target cancer cells, [known as PARP inhibitors](#).

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PARP inhibitors work by blocking cancer cells from relying on a survival tactic: the ability to repair their own DNA after their DNA is damaged naturally or by other drug treatments. This, in turn, contributes to cancer-cell death.

Health regulators [have approved these types of drugs](#) in recent years to treat ovarian, breast, prostate and pancreatic cancers.

The drugs have been found to be particularly useful against cancers associated with harmful mutations in genes known as BRCA1 and BRCA2. Women with these hereditary mutations have a higher risk of developing breast cancer, and often at a younger age than is typical.

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