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# Researchers Look To Old Drugs For A Possible Coronavirus Treatment – It Might Just Work



**Mary Beth Pfeiffer** Contributor

*I am a fire-in-the-belly country journalist who found a scandal in my backyard and wrote a book on it. Government and medicine have systematically failed us on a spreading plague of ticks. And they know it.*

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Scientists are studying old drugs for possible use against the coronavirus. GETTY

*Update on March 19: In a press conference, President Trump [announced](#) that the FDA was fast-tracking use of hydroxychloroquine and other anti-viral drugs for COVID-19 patients.*

An old malaria and autoimmune drug is showing promise as a potential treatment for COVID-19 – although health officials are urging caution until clinical trials are done.

The drug, hydroxychloroquine, sold under the brand name Plaquenil, was [reported](#) March 9 in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* journal to be effective at killing the virus in laboratory experiments. In a letter in [Cell Discovery](#) Wednesday, the study’s authors, mainly from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Wuhan, wrote, “(W)e predict that the drug has a good potential to combat the disease.”

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Repurposing established drugs like Plaquenil – which was approved in 1955 – may be

suffering another global epidemic, Lyme disease.

As with the tick-borne illness, COVID physician-researchers have now taken laboratory findings – in which the organism was killed or reduced in petri dishes treated with selected drugs – and advanced to the next step: Patient treatment.

### **Rapid resolution**

While unpublished yet, the [first patient trial](#) of Plaquenil for COVID, conducted in Marseilles, France, has reported encouraging early results. The trial, [announced in a video](#) on Monday, was led by Didier Raoult, a physician-scientist who has published on [microbes](#) for several decades.

According to a draft article by Raoult’s team and obtained by me, 36 patients were enrolled in the trial, including 16 infected controls and 20 treated patients. The test group was given 600 mg daily of Plaquenil, which is on the WHO’s List of Essential Medicines and has been used for [malaria, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus](#).

At day three, the study reported, 50 percent of the treated group turned from positive to negative for the COVID virus.

By day six, 70 percent tested negative.

As intriguing, of the 20 test patients, six who were treated with both Plaquenil and the antibiotic azithromycin did even better, the team reported. Five of the six, or 83 percent, tested negative at day three. All six, 100 percent, tested negative at day six.

Meantime, the control patients largely stayed sick longer. On days three and six, just 6.3 percent and 12.5 percent, respectively, tested negative. The research paper did not include how they were alternatively treated.

Raoult’s findings prompted the French Minister of Health Tuesday to approve expanded treatment trials, with one commencing in [Lille](#), according to France 3, a public television station.

### **WHO: No proof yet**

World Health Organization officials were asked at a [press briefing](#) on Feb. 20 about chloroquine, which is closely related to hydroxychloroquine. Dr. Janet Diaz, a WHO official, responded: “For chloroquine there is no proof that that is an effective treatment at this time. We recommend that therapeutics be tested under ethically approved clinical trials to show efficacy and safety.”

At the time, Diaz instead mentioned “priority therapeutics” including lopinavir, ritonavir and remdesivir that were under review for COVID. Indeed, many other drugs are on a list of pharmaceuticals that scientists are [attempting to repurpose](#) for the novel coronavirus.

adding that the “safety profile of hydroxychloroquine is good.”

Nonetheless, he said, “I agree with authorities and colleagues that, before recommending this treatment on a large scale, this efficacy should be further studied on a bigger number of patients with a longer follow-up.”

Using already approved drugs has obvious advantages. Hurdles to approval have been cleared. Side effects are known. Generics are often available.

Kenneth Liegner, a long-time Lyme disease physician in upstate New York reported patient improvement with disulfiram, the generic of Antabuse, in a small published study. “It’s cheap as borscht,” he said — a clear benefit for a patient population that must often pay out of pocket.

In a short [paper](#) published this month in the International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents, before their Marseille trial results were announced, Roualt and two colleagues commented on the Chinese team’s findings that spurred their work. For one, they wrote, the drug’s “negligible” cost could allow use as both a treatment and prophylaxis for people exposed to the virus. “If clinical data confirm the biological results,” they posited, “the novel coronavirus-associated disease will have become one of the simplest and cheapest to treat and prevent among infectious respiratory diseases.”

Richard Horowitz, who has published on the use of the leprosy drug dapsone for Lyme disease, has also extensively used Plaquenil, or hydroxychloroquine. For intractable Lyme disease, “Plaquenil’s effect is based on its ability to help alkalize the intracellular compartment to make certain antibiotics more effective,” he said, noting that he uses a lower dose than in the French study — 400 mg versus 600 mg. “I have used it in thousands of cases and it has been safe at the lower dose range. Higher doses have been reported to have side effects, and time will tell how well tolerated the higher doses are,” he said.

As trials on Plaquenil — and other drugs — proceed, scientists will need to tease out factors that might have influenced early results, for better or worse. Among the interesting tidbits from the French study that are fodder for future research:

- In the control group, the mean age was 37, while the treated group’s was 51. That means the older group fared better — with the mean age skewed perhaps because sicker patients agreed to the new treatment.
- Four of the 16 controls were asymptomatic, while two of the 20 treated patients lacked symptoms.
- Around 60 percent of both groups had upper tract respiratory infection.

The paper concluded with this: “Our study has some limitations, including a small sample size, limited long-term outcome follow-up, and dropout of six patients from the study, however in the current context, we believe that our results should be shared with

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**Mary Beth Pfeiffer**

I am a veteran investigative journalist whose investigative reports on Lyme disease, for a small upstate New York newspaper, did something quite startling in 2012: They... **Read More**

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DISCOUNT TIRE

At Discount Tire we have a strong culture of caring for and cultivating our people. We're an industry leader with more than 24,000 employees that likes to promote from within. So, when it comes to ensuring our people are prepared for and have the tools needed to succeed in their career at Discount Tire, we do more than just talk about it, we invest. Like most people, our employees have career goals, or what we call "The Dream." To best support their dreams, we provide professional development and training resources through our Discount Tire University (DTU); however, we're always looking for innovative ways to help our people learn. And our training academies are a great example. Several years ago, one of our store teams identified gaps in their new-hire training. After receiving feedback from employees, they determined a more hands-on learning approach was needed. News of this approach and its subsequent positive results made its way to corporate and we quickly set out to see how we could re-create what this store had done, to ensure other employees had the same valuable learning opportunities. "Our training academies are a by-product of our focus on our employees and our customers," said Al Hatfield, assistant vice president of Discount Tire. "At the academy, we train our employees on company best practices and critical safety procedures. Most important, we instill confidence in them before they start their new position so that they can provide a world class customer experience."

### **Our Approach**

In our academies, training and applying best practices help keep our employees safe on the job, and our customers safe on the road. Furthermore, when it comes to engagement, we deliver learning in a way that makes it fun and memorable, so our employees fully engage with course materials and instructors. We want employees to see their full potential beyond the job they applied for, so their engagement doesn't stop at academy graduation. Coaching and mentoring are key components of any successful organization. Our academy coaches, who are store leaders, take interaction to new levels, with the intent of keeping graduates focused on their career goals within the company. We listen to what our people say. We also empower them to speak up and tell us if they see ways to innovate. When employees are vocal it helps us better support them in their career

## High Value Investments

The short- and long-term value training academy students bring to Discount Tire is significant, especially for recruitment and retention. We recently asked a few academy graduates what they thought about their training and they said they feel more prepared for their new careers and that they want to go on to achieve their dream. What this tells us is that our training academies are cultivating well-trained employees who understand their role, are excited for their new careers, and who are loyal to the company's long-term vision. "I really like the family aspect here and that the teachers help keep us focused," said a recent graduate. "I feel like I'm more prepared to work in the store now." Training and educating employees on company culture and building individual capabilities takes commitment from the highest levels in the company — and it takes financial investment. The payoff is a well-trained workforce that is invested in the long-term, not only in the growth of their career, but also in the growth of the company. We know that our employees are the foundation of our company and will continue to invest in their futures.

 **Lori Governale**

Lori Governale, Senior Vice President of People Care, joined Discount Tire in 1983. Starting out in the Accounting Department shortly after attending South Dakota State... [Read More](#)

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