

Stem Cells: What You Should Know

A lot of claims about stem cell treatments are untrue, and the evidence supporting these regenerative treatments is still inconclusive for many ailments. The only FDA-approved stem cell therapies are those involving one specific type of stem cell to treat certain cancers, including leukemias and lymphomas. Any stem cell uses beyond this are not FDA-proven and may not be safe. Learn more about proven effectiveness before going to a stem cell treatment center for any type of stem cell therapy. Your doctor should always be a resource for you when making medical decisions.

WHAT ARE STEM CELLS? WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF STEM CELLS IN MEDICINE?

Every organ in the body is made up of cells that originated from stem cells. Stem cells have the special ability to become more than one type of cell in the body and to keep dividing and multiplying without limits. Theoretically, stem cells can be used to restore any tissue in the body that is lost or damaged by illness or injury, and many potential treatments are currently being studied.

WHAT SHOULD YOU WATCH OUT FOR?

Many stem cell treatments are unproven and still experimental. Although stem cells may offer large potential in helping people in the future, they also can be dangerous if used incorrectly. For example, during treatments, stem cells can travel to the wrong parts of the body and cause problems, and they also have the ability to become tumors.

“STEM CELL CLINICS”

In recent years, many “stem cell clinics” have opened, both in the United States and around the world. These clinics offer various “stem cell treatments” that are not scientifically proven and have not been approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). There were two clinics nationwide in 2009; today there are more than 700. Stem cell treatments are not covered by private insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid. These clinics mostly claim to use stem cells from one’s own body fat, bone marrow, or blood, although some clinics use cells from amniotic fluid, placental tissue, umbilical cord tissue, and even unknown sources of cells from other donors. It is unknown whether the cells used are actually stem cells. These clinics tend to engage in false advertising to the public, with claims that stem cell treatments help a variety of conditions ranging from arthritis to autism. The FDA is currently developing guidelines to more strictly regulate these clinics.

Source: Journal of the American Medical Association. Jill Jin, MD, MPH. JAMA Patient Page, 1/17/17. Volume 317, Number 3.

COULD UNPROVEN STEM CELL TREATMENTS BE HARMFUL?

Yes. A number of clinics are offering treatment in ways that do not meet normal standards of safety. Additionally, some stem cell therapies that are offered without FDA approval give patients a promise of false hope without scientific proof, with high out of pocket expense.

If you or someone you know has concerns about the stem cell therapy you have received, you can contact:

VERMONT OFFICE OF PROFESSIONAL REGULATION

sec.state.vt.us/professional-regulation.aspx

VERMONT BOARD OF MEDICAL PRACTICE

HealthVermont.gov/Systems/Medical-Practice-Board

VERMONT ATTORNEY GENERAL’S OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

UVM.edu/consumer

For more information:

US FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION – FDA CONSUMER UPDATES

fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/fda-warns-about-stem-cell-therapies