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Could Black Mamba Snake Venom Replace Morphine?

Painkilling compounds lack side effects of current drugs, study says.



Venom of the black mamba (pictured) has painkilling compounds as potent as morphine.

Photograph by George Grall, National Geographic

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Kate Andries
National Geographic News
Updated October 4, 2012

The venom from one of the world's most venomous snakes could be the key to a new breed of painkiller, a new study says.

Pain-relieving compounds—called mambalgins—isolated from the venom of Africa's black mamba snake are as strong as some opiates, including morphine, without the risk of respiratory distress and other side effects common with pain-reducing drugs.

"It's remarkable that this was made possible from the deadly venom of one of the most venomous snakes," said study leader Anne Baron, of France's Institute of Molecular and Cellular Pharmacology. (See snake pictures.)

Prior studies have shown that certain snake venoms contain toxins that can evoke pain by activating acid-sensing ion channels (ASICs) in the central and peripheral nervous system. Baron and colleagues discovered that with the isolation of peptides they named mambalgins, pain can be minimized or even stopped by targeting and inhibiting certain ASICs within the body.

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An eight-year-old Chinese girl was diagnosed with lung cancer that has been attributed to pollution—one more tragedy in how air quality can affect health.



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