



Efficiency of Nilavembu

What is the issue?

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- Tamil Nadu with one of the worst dengue epidemics it has seen.
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- As part of its response, the government is freely distributing a herbal concoction called nilavembu kudineer.
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What is nilavembu?

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- One of the core ingredients of the niluvembu kudineer is andrographis paniculata (AP).
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- It is used in herbal medicine systems across South Asia.
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- It is recommended for fevers under the ancient Siddha system of medicine.
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- Even though there is no evidence of their efficacy, nilavembu along with other alternative remedies such as papaya-leaf juice and goat milk are used by many during epidemics.
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Is it really effective?

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- Some evidence exists for its potency against a range of illnesses.
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- AP is known to inhibit the dengue virus in animal cells in a laboratory, and to reduce symptoms of respiratory tract infections in small human trials.
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- But innumerable other herbal remedies also show such early promise.
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- But only a tiny handful of these remedies go on to prove their efficacy in large-scale, placebo-controlled human trials.
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- This is because the science of developing drugs from medicinal plants is complicated.
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- Poly-herbal remedies like nilavembu are a mix of several compounds, while most of modern medicine relies on single-compounds.
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- Plus, the amount of the active ingredient i.e the compound in a herb that acts against an illness, varies across plants.
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- So drug makers have to find a way to identify this ingredient and test it in large- scale trials.
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- This exercise requires not only massive financial investment but also intellectual honesty.
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What are the risks?

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- As the studies are limited, the possible side-effects are not known completely.
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- At the best Nilavembu can only be a supplement.
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- But it is possible that people will misconstrue a supplement for a cure.
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- The risk of patients who need medical attention, such as those with dengue haemorrhagic fever, opting for this drug instead of rushing to a hospital should not be underestimated.
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What should be done?

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- While it is hard for government bodies to curb such practices, they must never endorse them.

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- Unfortunately, too many attempts in India by the government to validate traditional medicine are driven less by honesty and more by blind faith.

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- e.g Last year the CSIR launched an anti-diabetic herbal pill called BGR-34 on the strength of what appeared to be very poor evidence.

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Source: The Hindu

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