

Preventing and Treating Influenza (Flu)

Do you have asthma, diabetes, chronic cardiovascular disease or another long term medical condition? Or are you pregnant?

If so, you are at high risk of serious illness if you get the flu & the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says you should:

1. Get a flu vaccine each year to protect against getting the flu. A flu vaccine can prevent flu. Flu vaccines are safe and cannot give you the flu.
2. If you get the flu, take flu antiviral drugs to treat your illness if your doctor prescribes them.

Certain people are at greater risk of serious illness and death from flu. This includes young children, older people, pregnant women and people with certain long-term health conditions. Last flu season, for example, 80 percent of adults and 65 percent of children hospitalized from flu had a long-term health condition or were pregnant. Asthma, diabetes and chronic cardiovascular disease were the three most common of these conditions (see box).



This fact sheet provides information about treating the flu with antiviral drugs:

What are antiviral drugs?

Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid or an inhaled powder) that fight against the flu in your body. A flu vaccine is the first and most important step in preventing flu. Antiviral drugs are a second line of defense to treat the flu if you get sick. You must have a prescription to get antiviral drugs; they are not sold over-the-counter. Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics.

Who should take antiviral drugs?

It's very important that antiviral drugs be used early to treat flu in:

- People who are very sick (for example people who are in the hospital).
- People who are sick with flu and have a long-term health condition that puts them at greater risk of serious flu complications, like asthma, diabetes or chronic heart disease (see box for full list).
- Young children, older people and women who are pregnant or have recently delivered a baby and who are sick with flu.

What are the benefits of antiviral drugs?

When used for treatment, these drugs can make you feel better and shorten the time you are sick by 1 or 2 days. They also can prevent serious flu complications.

When should antiviral drugs be taken for treatment?

Studies have shown that flu antiviral drugs work best for treatment when they are started within 2 days of getting sick. However, getting them later can still be helpful especially if the sick person is at greater risk of serious flu complications (see box) or if the person has certain symptoms (such as shortness of breath, chest pain/pressure, dizziness, or confusion) or is in the hospital because of the flu.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases

What antiviral drugs are recommended this flu season?

There are two antiviral drugs recommended by CDC this season. The brand names for these are Tamiflu® and Relenza® (The generic names for these drugs are oseltamivir and zanamivir). Tamiflu® is available as a pill or liquid and Relenza® is a powder that is inhaled.

How long should antiviral drugs be taken?

To treat flu, Tamiflu® and Relenza® are usually taken for 5 days, although people hospitalized with flu may need the medicine for longer than 5 days.

Can children take antiviral drugs?

Yes. Children can take antiviral drugs.

- Tamiflu® is approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in children 1 year of age or older. Tamiflu® can come in liquid for children or in capsules.
- Relenza® is FDA approved for treatment in children 7 years of age and older, but only for people without breathing problems (such as asthma) or heart disease. It is an inhaled powder that comes in a disk inhaler.

What are the side effects of antiviral drugs?

Side effects are different for each antiviral drug.

Tamiflu® has been in use since 1999. The most common side effects are nausea or vomiting which usually happen in the first 2 days of treatment. Taking Tamiflu® with food can reduce the chance of having these side effects.

Relenza® has been in use since 1999. The most common side effects are dizziness, runny or stuffy nose, cough, diarrhea, nausea, or headache. Relenza® may also cause wheezing and trouble breathing in people with lung disease, which is why those people should not take this drug.

Confusion and abnormal behavior leading to injury has been observed rarely in people with the flu, mostly children, who were treated with Tamiflu® or Relenza®. Flu can also cause these behaviors. But people taking these drugs should be watched for signs of unusual behavior. This behavior should be immediately reported to a health care provider.

If an antiviral drug has been prescribed for you, ask your doctor to explain how to use the drug and any possible side effects.

Medical conditions that increase the risk from flu include:

- Asthma
- Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions
- Chronic lung disease (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] and cystic fibrosis)
- Heart disease (such as congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease)
- Blood disorders (such as sickle cell disease)
- Endocrine disorders (such as diabetes mellitus)
- Kidney disorders
- Liver disorders

- Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)
- Weakened immune system due to disease or medication (such as people with HIV or AIDS, or cancer, or those on chronic steroids)
- People younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy
- People with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Other people at high risk from the flu:

- Children younger than 2 years old
- Adults 65 years and older
- Pregnant women and women up to 2 weeks from end of pregnancy