

# What You Should Know About Influenza (Flu) Antiviral Drugs

FIGHT FLU



## Can the flu be treated?

Yes. There are prescription medications called “antiviral drugs” that can treat flu illness.

## What are antiviral drugs?

Antiviral drugs are prescription medicines (pills, liquid, or an inhaled powder) that fight against the flu in your body. Antiviral drugs are not sold over-the-counter. You can only get them if you have a prescription from your doctor or health care provider. Antiviral drugs are different from antibiotics, which fight against bacterial infections.

## What should I do if I think I have the flu?

If you get the flu, antiviral drugs are a treatment option. Check with your doctor promptly if you are at high risk of serious flu complications (see the next page for full list of high risk factors) and you get flu symptoms. Flu symptoms can include fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, and fatigue. Your doctor may prescribe antiviral drugs to treat your flu illness.

## Should I still get a flu vaccine?

Yes. Antiviral drugs are not a substitute for getting a flu vaccine. While flu vaccine can vary in how well it works, a flu vaccine is the first and best way to prevent influenza. Antiviral drugs are a second line of defense to treat the flu if you get sick.

## What are the benefits of antiviral drugs?

When used for treatment, antiviral drugs can lessen symptoms and shorten the time you are sick by 1 or 2 days. They also can prevent serious flu complications, like pneumonia. For people at high risk of serious flu complications, treatment with an antiviral drug can mean the difference between having a milder illness versus a very serious illness that could result in a hospital stay.

## What are the possible side effects of antiviral drugs?

Some side effects have been associated with the use of flu antiviral drugs, including nausea, vomiting, dizziness, runny or stuffy nose, cough, diarrhea, headache, and some behavioral side effects. These are uncommon. Your doctor can give you more information about these drugs or you can check the CDC or the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) websites.

## When should antiviral drugs be taken for treatment?

Studies show that flu antiviral drugs work best for treatment when they are started within 2 days of getting sick. However, starting them later can still be helpful, especially if the sick person is at high risk of serious flu complications or is very sick from the flu. Follow instructions for taking these drugs.



For more information, visit:  
[www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu)  
or call **1-800-CDC-INFO**



**U.S. Department of  
Health and Human Services**  
Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention

## What antiviral drugs are recommended this flu season?

There are three FDA-approved antiviral drugs recommended by CDC this season. The brand names for these are Tamiflu® (generic name oseltamivir), Relenza® (generic name zanamivir), and Rapivab® (generic name peramivir). Tamiflu® is available as a pill or liquid and Relenza® is a powder that is inhaled. (Relenza® is not for people with breathing problems like asthma or COPD, for example.) Rapivab® is given intravenously by a health care provider.



## How long should antiviral drugs be taken?

To treat the flu, Tamiflu® and Relenza® are usually prescribed for 5 days, although people hospitalized with the flu may need the medicine for longer than 5 days. Rapivab® is given intravenously for 15 to 30 minutes.

## Can children and pregnant women take antiviral drugs?

Yes. Children and pregnant women can take antiviral drugs.

## Who should take antiviral drugs?

It's very important that antiviral drugs are used early to treat people who are very sick with the flu (for example, people who are in the hospital) and people who are sick with the flu who are at high risk of serious flu complications, either because of their age or because they have a high risk medical condition. Other people also may be treated with antiviral drugs by their doctor this season. Most people who are otherwise healthy and get the flu, however, do not need to be treated with antiviral drugs.

### The following is a list of all the health and age factors that are known to increase a person's risk of getting serious complications from the flu:

- Asthma
- Blood disorders (such as sickle cell disease)
- Chronic lung disease (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] and cystic fibrosis)
- Endocrine disorders (such as diabetes mellitus)
- Extreme obesity (people with a body mass index [BMI] of 40 or greater)
- Heart disease (such as congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure and coronary artery disease)
- Kidney disorders
- Liver disorders
- Metabolic disorders (such as inherited metabolic disorders and mitochondrial disorders)
- Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions
- People younger than 19 years of age and on long-term aspirin therapy
- Weakened immune system due to medication (such as people with HIV or AIDS, or cancer, or those on chronic steroids)

#### Other people at high risk from the flu:

- Adults 65 years and older
- Children younger than 5 years old, but especially children younger than 2 years old
- Pregnant women and women up to 2 weeks after the end of pregnancy
- American Indians and Alaska Natives

It is especially important that these people get a flu vaccine and seek medical treatment quickly if they get flu symptoms.