Treating **Influenza (Flu)**

FIGHT FLU

Information for People at High Risk for Flu Complications

Do you have Asthma, Diabetes, or Chronic Heart Disease?

If so, you are at high risk of serious illness if you get the flu. In past flu seasons, as many as 80 percent of adults hospitalized from flu complications had a long-term health condition, as did about 50 percent of hospitalized children. Asthma, diabetes and chronic heart disease were among the most common of these. Treatment with an influenza antiviral drug can mean the difference between having milder illness instead of very serious illness that could result in a hospital stay. This fact sheet provides information about using prescription antiviral drugs to treat influenza in people at high risk for flu complications.

Why am I at greater risk of serious flu complications?

Your medical condition makes it more likely that you will get complications from the flu, like pneumonia. The flu also can make long-term health problems worse, even if they are well-managed. People with asthma or chronic congestive heart failure may experience worsening of their conditions. Diabetes (type 1 and 2) can make the immune system less able to fight the flu. Also, flu illness can raise blood sugar levels.

Can the flu be treated?

Yes. There are prescription medications called “antiviral drugs” that can be used to treat influenza illness. Antiviral drugs fight influenza viruses in your body. They 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 have a high risk factor and you get flu symptoms. Symptoms of flu 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 vaccines can vary in how they work, flu vaccination 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.
- Antiviral drugs also can prevent serious flu-related complications (like pneumonia). This is especially important for people with a high-risk health condition, like asthma, diabetes or chronic heart disease.

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Health and age factors known to increase a person's risk for developing flu-related complications:

- Asthma
- Neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions
- 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)
- 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)
- Extreme obesity (with a body mass index [BMI] of 40 or more)
- People younger than 19 years of age on long-term aspirin therapy
- Weakened immune system due to disease or 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

What are the possible side effects of antiviral drugs?

Some side effects have been associated with the use of influenza 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 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (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 has a high-risk factor (see list in sidebar) or is very sick from the flu (for example, hospitalized patients). Follow your doctor's instructions for taking these drugs.

What antiviral drugs are recommended?

There are three FDA-approved influenza antiviral drugs recommended by CDC. 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 administered intravenously by a health care provider.

How long should antiviral drugs be taken?

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

- People who are very sick with the flu (for example, people who are in the hospital).
- People who are sick with the flu and have a high-risk health condition like asthma, diabetes or chronic heart disease. (See the full list of high-risk factors).

For more information, visit:
www.cdc.gov/flu

or call
1-800-CDC-INFO

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