

Antiviral medication (flu treatment and prevention)

: important information



What are antivirals?

Antiviral drugs are a type of medication used specifically for treating viral infections. They act by killing or preventing the growth of viruses.

Oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and Zanamivir (Relenza) are two types of antiviral medications used against the flu virus. You may have been advised to take one of these. They are only available by prescription. You should not buy these from the internet or from another unofficial source. The NHS has enough antiviral medication for everyone who needs it.

Why might I need antivirals?

A doctor or nurse will discuss with you whether you may benefit from antivirals. Most people will not require antivirals as they will have a mild illness and will recover quickly. In these cases the risk of side-effects from these drugs may outweigh the benefit of taking them.

Some people however may need to take antivirals. Antivirals do not cure the flu, but they may help people to recover by:

- ❖ relieving some of the symptoms
- ❖ reducing the length of time someone is ill

Before you take antivirals

Ensure your doctor is aware if you:

- ❖ have any allergies
- ❖ have any health problems, especially problems with your kidneys
- ❖ are pregnant
- ❖ are breastfeeding

How do I take antivirals?

Tamiflu comes as capsules and should be:

- ❖ swallowed whole with water
- ❖ taken with or without food, but it is recommended to take antivirals with food to reduce the chance of feeling or being sick

Relenza is usually provided as a dry powder to inhale.

Antivirals can be taken at the same time as paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin. There is only a very small risk that antivirals will alter the effect of any other medications. You will be advised on the appropriate dose and the length of treatment.

What if my child can't swallow capsules?

Children under one will be given liquid medicine. Those older than one who may be unable to swallow capsules can be given the right dose by doing the following:

- ❖ Open the capsule
- ❖ Mask the bitter taste by pouring the contents into a small amount (1 teaspoon maximum) of a sweetened food product such as:
 - regular or sugar-free chocolate syrup
 - honey (only for children two years or older)
 - light brown or table sugar dissolved in water

- dessert toppings
- sweetened condensed milk
- apple sauce
- yogurt
- ❖ Stir the mixture and give it all to your child
- ❖ Check to see that it is swallowed

What are the possible side effects?

Like all medicines, antivirals can cause side effects, although not everyone gets them.

Common side effects include:

- ❖ nausea and vomiting
- ❖ diarrhoea and stomach ache
- ❖ headache

These side effects mostly occur after the first dose of the medicine and will usually stop as treatment continues.

Less common side effects include:

- ❖ sleeping difficulties
- ❖ skin reactions
- ❖ heart rhythm abnormalities
- ❖ hallucinations
- ❖ abnormal behaviour

These symptoms may also be caused by the flu virus.

You should tell your doctor if your flu symptoms get worse or the fever continues.

What if I get side effects?

You should tell your pharmacist or doctor straight away if you are concerned that any of the side effects get serious.

Will I still need flu vaccination?

Anti-virals do not take the place of vaccination. Vaccination is the most effective way of protecting against flu.

People eligible for the flu vaccine on the NHS will be contacted when it is available.

Need further advice or information?

- ❖ NHS Inform www.nhsinform.co.uk
- ❖ NHS24 ☎ 111 www.nhs24.co.uk
- ❖ www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk
- ❖ Local health clinic or GP

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