

Treating Flu with Antiviral Medicines

Frequently Asked Questions

What are antiviral medicines?

Antiviral medicines are prescription drugs that can help your body fight harmful infections by targeting a virus and limiting its ability to grow and spread within the body. Antivirals can ease symptoms, shorten the duration of a viral infection, and lower the risk of getting or spreading viruses. They are especially valuable for individuals at higher risk of complications, like older adults.

How do flu antivirals work?

Flu antiviral treatments work by targeting the influenza virus to stop it from spreading in the body. Flu antivirals are most effective when taken early, ideally within 48 hours of the first flu symptoms appearing.

Flu antivirals come in a variety of forms, including pills, liquids, inhaled powders, or intravenous solutions. Antiviral treatments for flu include:

- **Oseltamivir Phosphate (Tamiflu)** – Pills taken orally
- **Zanamivir (Relenza)** – A powder inhaled through the mouth
- **Baloxavir Marboxil (Xofluza)** – Pill taken orally
- **Peramivir (Rapivab)** – An injectable medicine given by a healthcare provider



Who should take antiviral medicines for the flu?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends prompt antiviral treatment for people who are at increased risk of serious flu complications, including those who suspect they have the flu. High-risk groups include:

- Adults ages 65 and older
- People with chronic health conditions like asthma and/or chronic lung disease, diabetes (including gestational diabetes), and/or heart disease
- Pregnant people or those who recently gave birth
- Young children under the age of 5, particularly those under 2 years old

Why are antiviral treatments important for older adults?

Adults ages 65 and older are at higher risk of developing serious complications from flu compared with young, healthy adults due, in part, to a natural, age-related decline in immune defenses. While flu cases vary in severity from year to year, during most seasons, people 65 years and older bear the greatest burden of severe flu disease.

Over the past few years, the CDC estimates that:

- 70–85% of seasonal flu-related deaths occurred in people ages 65 and older.
- 50–70% of seasonal flu-related hospitalizations occur in this age group.

Antiviral medicines can help reduce the risk of complications such as pneumonia, minimize the likelihood of hospitalization, and speed up recovery.

When should I start an antiviral treatment if I have flu symptoms?



Antiviral flu treatments should be started as soon as possible, ideally within the first 48 hours of noticing symptoms. The earlier you begin, the more effective the treatment will be.

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Common flu symptoms include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough or sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Muscle aches or body pain
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Headaches

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider promptly to discuss antiviral treatment.

Can antivirals be used to prevent the flu?



Yes. In certain cases, antiviral medicines can be prescribed to help prevent the flu, especially for those at high risk of serious illness or during significant flu outbreaks, such as in nursing homes.

Do antivirals work against all types of flu?

Antivirals are effective against most common strains of influenza, including influenza A and B. However, their effectiveness depends on the specific virus strain and whether it is resistant to the medicine.

Do I still need a flu vaccine if I take antiviral medicines?



Yes, antiviral medicines are not a substitute for the flu vaccine. Vaccination remains the best way to prevent the flu and its complications.

The CDC recommends that people ages 65 and older get a preferential flu vaccine—a [high dose](#), [recombinant](#), or [adjuvanted](#) flu vaccine. Research shows that these vaccines are more effective in older adults than other available vaccines.

Are there side effects from flu antiviral medicines?

While flu antivirals are generally safe, some people may experience mild side effects, including:

- Nausea or vomiting (with oseltamivir)
- Diarrhea
- Headache or dizziness
- Rare allergic reactions

If you experience severe or unusual side effects, contact your doctor immediately.

Does Medicare cover flu antiviral treatments?

Yes, Medicare Part D and most insurance plans cover prescription antiviral medicines. Check with your provider or pharmacist to confirm your specific coverage and copay details.

What should I do if I suspect I have the flu?



If you experience flu symptoms:

- **Call your healthcare provider** as soon as possible to discuss antiviral treatment.
- **Stay home** to rest and avoid spreading the virus.
- **Stay hydrated** and monitor your symptoms.

Can I still get the flu vaccine if I am taking antivirals?

Yes, flu antivirals do not interfere with the flu vaccine. It is still important to get vaccinated every year to prevent the flu.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, speak with your healthcare provider or pharmacist, or visit reliable health resources like:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**
- **Medicare.gov**



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