

H1N1 (Swine) Flu: The Facts About Antiviral Medications

To most people, the new H1N1 (swine) flu outbreak seemed to come out of nowhere. But experts already had weapons in their arsenal to help fight the infection: the antiviral medications Tamiflu (oseltamivir) and Relenza (zanamivir). They are especially important because we don't yet have a vaccine against swine flu.

What are flu antivirals?

Flu antivirals are medicines that interfere with the growth of flu viruses in the body. If you get sick, they can help you have a milder illness and recover more quickly. They may also help prevent serious complications. And they can help prevent infection in people who have been exposed to the virus and would be at high risk for serious outcomes from the illness.

Tamiflu is taken as a pill. Relenza is an inhaled medication. Relenza is not recommended for people with asthma or other airway diseases.



Who should take flu antiviral medications?

It's likely that most people who get swine flu will not need to be treated with antivirals. They'll have a mild illness, similar to seasonal flu, and recover fully.

But swine flu can sometimes lead to serious complications such as pneumonia and respiratory failure. These complications may be more likely in certain high-risk groups, such as:

- Children younger than 5 years of age.
- Children with chronic medical problems or certain developmental disabilities.
- Anyone age 19 years or younger who is receiving long-term aspirin therapy. (They might be at risk for Reye syndrome after influenza infection.)
- People older than 65. (People age 65 and older are at higher risk for complications from seasonal influenza, but so far this has not held true for H1N1 flu.)
- People who live in nursing homes and other chronic care facilities.
- Pregnant women.
- People who have certain chronic diseases.
- People who have HIV or a weak immune system.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that doctors consider antiviral medications for:

- Anyone who is hospitalized with confirmed, probable or suspected H1N1 (swine) flu
- People with suspected H1N1 (swine) flu who are at higher risk for seasonal flu complications

The CDC also states that antiviral medication should be considered for:

- High-risk people who live with someone who has or probably has swine flu
- Health care workers who have been exposed to swine flu

Doctors may consider antivirals for other people, too. Call your doctor if you think you have been exposed to swine flu. Your doctor can tell you if you will need testing or treatment.

Why not give antivirals to everyone?

Antivirals, like all medications, have risks. Doctors must weigh the risks against the benefits in deciding which people to treat. The risks are justified in people with severe illness and those who might suffer serious complications without treatment.

Perhaps the most serious risk is that the swine flu virus could develop resistance to antivirals. In other words, the virus could outsmart the drugs so they don't work anymore. This happened with two older antiviral medications, amantadine and rimantadine. By using antivirals only when they're really needed, we can help keep them as a powerful tool to use against future flu outbreaks.