

What are flu antiviral drugs?

Flu antiviral drugs are drugs that decrease the ability of flu viruses to reproduce. While getting a flu vaccine each year is one of the best ways to protect you from the flu, antiviral drugs may be used to treat the flu or to prevent flu.

Why should people take flu antiviral drugs?

For treatment, antiviral drugs should be started within 2 days after becoming sick. When used this way, these drugs can reduce the severity of flu symptoms and shorten the time people are sick by 1 or 2 days. They also may make people less contagious to others.

How effective are antiviral drugs at preventing the flu?

When used to prevent the flu, antiviral drugs are about 70% to 90% effective. It's important to remember that flu antiviral drugs are not a substitute for getting a flu vaccine.

What antiviral medications are recommended for treatment as well as prevention of flu?

The two drugs recommended for use are Tamiflu® and Relenza®. They are chemically related antiviral drugs that fight against both influenza A and B viruses. Oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu®) is approved to both treat and prevent flu in people one year of age and older. Zanamivir (brand name Relenza®) is approved to treat flu in people 7 years and older and to prevent flu in people 5 years and older.

Who should take antiviral drugs for flu?

In general, antiviral drugs can be offered to anyone who wants to avoid and/or treat the flu; people who are at high risk of serious flu-related complications may benefit most from these drugs. Also, close contacts of people with the flu who are at high risk of serious flu-related complications may benefit from antiviral drugs to protect them from getting sick.

How can someone get an antiviral drug for the flu?

People must get antiviral drugs from their doctor.

How long should antiviral drugs be taken?

The length of time antiviral drugs should be taken depends on if they are being used to treat or to prevent the flu. To prevent the flu, antiviral drugs should be taken for as long as flu viruses are circulating in a given setting. To treat flu, oseltamivir and zanamivir are taken for 5 days.

What are the side effects of flu antiviral drugs?

Like any medication, side effects are possible and are different for each medicine. It is important for people to ask their doctors to explain how to use the medicine and any possible side effects. Health care professionals prescribing flu antiviral drugs should let their patients about serious side effects that can occur.

Can flu antiviral drugs help with other illnesses such as the common cold?

No. Flu antiviral drugs only work against flu viruses. They will not help reduce symptoms from the common cold or any other flu-like illnesses caused by viruses other than flu viruses.

What should be done if problems occur when taking the flu antiviral medicine?

If side effects occur while taking flu antiviral medications, people should talk to their health care provider immediately.

Can flu antiviral medicine be given to pregnant women?

No studies have been done to test the safety of these drugs for pregnant women. Because of the unknown effects of these drugs on pregnant women and their unborn children, doctors should use their clinical judgment and should refer to the drug package insert.

