

Antivirals for Pandemic Influenza

Four antiviral drugs for influenza are currently licensed for use in the United States. Two have shown some effectiveness against the virus that causes avian influenza (H5N1): oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza). The federal government is stockpiling both drugs as part of pandemic preparedness. Each drug can be used to treat persons who are ill with influenza (i.e., treatment) or to protect healthy individuals from becoming ill from the virus (i.e., prophylaxis). These drugs have been used for treatment and prophylaxis of seasonal influenza since their introduction in 1999. Although immunization remains the cornerstone for control of influenza, antiviral drugs may be particularly useful in a pandemic when a vaccine may not initially be available and for treating persons who are ill.

Many people have asked about creating a personal stockpile of antivirals. Federal and state public health officials have strongly discouraged this practice for several reasons. First, the drugs are in relatively short supply. They should be reserved for patients in greatest need during the regular flu season. Second, there is concern that widespread use of the drugs might promote development of drug resistance. Third, the drugs are expensive and have a finite shelf life. It is likely that many personal stockpiles would never be used appropriately prior to expiration.

Until H5N1 or another flu virus results in a pandemic, the true effectiveness of oseltamivir and zanamivir will remain unknown. A national stockpile for the drugs is a reasonable approach at this time. As more information becomes available, recommendations on use of antivirals in a pandemic setting are likely to change.

Submitted by:

Andrew Pelletier, MD, MPH

Maine CDC