

Oseltamivir (Tamiflu®)

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

An outbreak of influenza (also known as the flu) is occurring in this facility. A drug called oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) can help prevent the spread of the influenza virus during an outbreak. The following question-and-answer sheet has been created to help you or the person you represent decide whether to take this medication.

What is influenza (the flu)?

Influenza is a viral illness spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing or through contact with nasal fluids. It is most common in the late fall and winter and can last into the spring.

Symptoms may include fever, cough, sore throat, headache, muscle aches and extreme fatigue, lasting for two to seven days. Influenza can worsen heart, lung and kidney problems and can result in pneumonia, hospitalization and sometimes death. It is estimated that every year, 4,000 to 8,000 Canadians die from influenza complications like pneumonia.

Is the flu shot enough protection?

It is important for everyone age 65 and older (seniors) in hospitals and personal care homes to get an annual flu shot because the vaccine reduces the risks of getting influenza and also minimizes the risks of being hospitalized due to complications.

While the influenza vaccine prevents infection in 70 per cent of healthy adults, it can be less effective in seniors with chronic illness. Hospitalized patients and personal care home residents are often seniors who may suffer from one or more chronic illnesses. Having a chronic medical condition can result in a weaker immune response to the flu shot and make seniors more vulnerable to influenza complications, including hospitalizations.

What is oseltamivir (Tamiflu®)?

Oseltamivir is a prescription antiviral drug for the treatment and prevention of influenza. The drug is usually supplied in a capsule that is taken by mouth. The medication is also used to control influenza outbreaks caused by influenza viruses. In addition, the drug has been shown to be effective in reducing symptoms and complications of influenza if taken by individuals within two days of being exposed to the virus.

During the 2007-08 influenza season, resistance to oseltamivir was found in one type of influenza virus but public health experts still recommend its use to prevent the spread of influenza outbreaks. Although oseltamivir is used to treat and prevent influenza, getting vaccinated against influenza each fall is still the best way to prevent this illness.

What are the side effects?

The most common side effects are nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. This does not happen with very many people who take the drug and the effects do not usually last long. If these side effects do occur, they usually happen after the first dose. Taking the drug with food may reduce these side effects. Rare side effects such as heart, blood and bowel problems have been reported in less than 1% of patients treated with oseltamivir. If you have questions about these rare side effects, talk to your doctor.

Young children and adolescents may be at increased risk of confusion, delirium, hallucinations or abnormal behavior when treated with oseltamivir early in their illness. If any of these symptoms occur, report them to your doctor. Your doctor will decide if you should continue taking this drug. Studies to date show that oseltamivir does not necessarily cause these symptoms in children and adolescents.

Does oseltamivir interact with other drugs?

Current studies do not show any significant interactions with other drugs. The doctor may check your medication history before prescribing oseltamivir.

How long do I take this drug?

Oseltamivir may be given for up to 14 days.

What happens if I get influenza while taking the drug?

Since oseltamivir can reduce symptoms and complications, it can help to fight influenza when someone has already caught the virus. In such cases, a higher dose of oseltamivir may be prescribed for five days and then stopped.

Do I have to take oseltamivir?

No. You can choose if you wish to take oseltamivir or not. No changes will be made to any care or treatment that you are already receiving or that of the person you are representing.

Is there a cost?

In an outbreak situation, Manitoba Health and Healthy Living provides the medication at no charge to hospital patients or long-term care facility residents.

Who should not take oseltamivir?

- You should not take this medication if you had a previous severe allergic reaction to any ingredients in the oseltamivir drug.
- If you suffer from severe kidney or liver disease, you should not take this medication.
- Oseltamivir should not be used by mothers breastfeeding infants under one year of age.

Note about pregnancy: Oseltamivir can be used during pregnancy only if the potential benefit justifies the potential risk to the baby (fetus). The doctor will discuss this with you if you are pregnant.

More information?

If you have other questions about oseltamivir or its use, please contact the doctor prescribing this medication at your personal care home or hospital for more information.

Local Public Health Unit Stamp