



**NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND
MENTAL HYGIENE**

Thomas Farley, MD, MPH
Commissioner

Medicine for H1N1 Flu: Who Needs It, How to Get It

Are there medicines that can prevent or treat influenza?

Yes. There are two such drugs: oseltamivir (Tamiflu[®]) and zanamavir (Relenza[®]). The first is taken orally, the other is inhaled. These medications, which require a doctor's prescription, are known as antivirals. They can prevent severe illness by helping your body combat influenza viruses.

Who should take these medicines?

Most people recover completely from influenza without medication, but certain people are at higher risk of severe illness or complications. If you or a family member meet one of the descriptions on this list, and you develop flu-like illness (fever accompanied by cough or sore throat), please call your doctor or clinic to discuss treatment with antiviral medicine.

- People over 65 or under 2 years of age
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic lung problems, such as asthma or emphysema
- People with chronic heart, kidney, liver or blood disorders
- People with neurological disorders that can cause breathing problems
- People with diabetes
- People whose immune systems are weakened due to illness or medication
- People under 18 years who are on long-term aspirin therapy

If you belong to one of these higher-risk groups, and you're in close contact with someone who has influenza, a health-care provider may recommend that you take antiviral medicine as a precaution.

Should I be tested for influenza before being treated for it?

No, you don't need a flu test to receive treatment for flu-like illness. Testing to confirm influenza infection should be reserved for people who are critically ill.

How can I get a prescription?

The Health Department recommends that doctors prescribe treatment for anyone with flu-like illness who belongs to any of the higher-risk groups listed above. If you or a family member is at higher risk and you develop flu-like illness, take your temperature. If the reading is 100.4 degrees or higher, call your health care provider and explain that you have flu-like illness and may be at risk of complications. You do not need to go to a hospital unless your symptoms are severe. The provider may want to see you, or may be able to prescribe treatment by calling your pharmacy.

Are antiviral medicines available at my local pharmacy?

They should be. The Health Department is assessing the availability of antivirals at New York City pharmacies, and finding that most have steady supplies. Before going to the pharmacy to fill a prescription, you may save time by calling first to make sure the medication is available. If the pharmacy you usually use does not have the medication, call other pharmacies in your neighborhood. Large chain pharmacies are reporting good supplies of antiviral medication. Pharmacies charge different prices for the same drugs, so you may want to check a few different outlets before filling your prescription.

Do these medicines come in liquid form?

Oseltamivir (Tamiflu[®]) is available as a liquid. It is used for children or those unable to swallow pills. If you need fill a prescription for the liquid form, call your pharmacist first to make sure it is available. Large pharmacies are reporting good supplies. If your pharmacy doesn't have the liquid form in stock, the pharmacist may be able to create it for you from capsules – a process called compounding. Not all pharmacies are capable of compounding.

I need antiviral medication but don't have a regular doctor. How can I get a prescription?

Every New Yorker should have a regular doctor or other health provider. If you don't have a regular provider, you can get one through your health plan. And if you don't have a health plan, you may qualify for free or low-cost health insurance. **To find out, call 311 and ask about HealthStat.**

If you need treatment immediately and don't have access to health coverage, services are available. New York City's public hospitals and community clinics will care for anyone in need, and will charge according to the person's ability to pay. Facilities operated by the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation (www.nyc.gov/html/hhc/html/home/home.shtml) set fees for services and medicine according to people's ability to pay. Services are also available at low cost or no cost through federally funded health centers. To find federally funded health centers near you go to <http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/> and enter your zip code. These health centers can provide:

- Checkups when you're well
- Treatment when you're sick
- Complete care when you're pregnant
- Immunizations and checkups for your children
- Dental care for your family
- Mental health and substance abuse care if you need it
- Prescription drugs

Before visiting a health center, you can call to schedule an appointment or find out if there is a clinic even closer to you.

What if I can't afford medications for influenza?

Patients receiving services through the Health and Hospitals Corporation may qualify for free or discounted medications. Some federally funded health clinics also provide prescription drugs to their patients, but antiviral medicine is not currently available through these programs.

June, 11 2009