How decisions are made around antivirals could help us strengthen our preparedness for health emergencies

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Why do we need to know about the buying, storing, and delivering antivirals?

Antivirals can help prevent serious illness and death from infections like the flu and COVID-19. When there is a large increase in infection due to viruses like flu (viral outbreaks), it is important that enough antivirals are available and that they can reach people quickly. This means that governments and health organisations need to make decisions about how many antivirals to buy and store, where to keep them, and how to distribute them. These decisions can be difficult because viral outbreaks are unpredictable, supplies may be limited, and demand for antivirals can change quickly.

This review asked what may impact decisions about buying, storing and delivering antivirals. These things could include people's knowledge about antivirals, their feelings, and the situation in which decisions are made.

How did we answer the question?

When studies are done, the reports of the results are stored in databases. We searched five of these databases for all the studies we could find on how decisions are taken around how antivirals are bought and stored and how they can be distributed. We then combined the data from eight studies.

What did we learn?

We identified several things that could allow us to make better decisions about how antivirals are bought, stored, and distributed:

- **Clear and consistent guidance is important.** Regular updates that are clearly communicated could help people who make decisions respond more effectively during future viral outbreaks;
- **Pharmacies may play an important role.** Pharmacists felt confident about helping distribute antivirals during a viral outbreak. The public also had a good opinion of pharmacies and often preferred them over public health clinics. Pharmacies were seen as easy to access and familiar. However, pharmacies did not always have enough staff or other resources to take on extra work;
- **Different ways of delivering antivirals are possible.** Telephone calls with doctors or pharmacists could, for example, be used more often. Delivering antivirals directly to people’s homes could also help them to receive the antivirals more quickly. Community

members such as family, friends, and neighbours were also seen as potential ways to help deliver antivirals to people recovering at home;

- **Fair access was seen as a goal.** Canadian research recommended making antivirals easier to access for people who are more vulnerable; and
- **Working together can improve distribution.** Teamwork between public health officials, pharmacists, doctors, nurses, and other groups could improve the buying, storage, and delivery of antivirals.

We also found several things that may make buying antivirals, storing antivirals and delivering antivirals more difficult. These included high antiviral costs, staff shortages, and pressure from pharmaceutical companies.

How certain are we about these findings?

The evidence available on this topic was limited. Many studies focused on pharmacists and members of the public rather than people who make decisions in the government, doctors and nurses, or people who plan for emergencies. Most studies were conducted in the United States, with only one study conducted in Canada. Also, most studies were published before the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the findings may not be accurate for Canada's current healthcare system or future viral outbreak situations.

Overall, this review shows that clear guidance from health agencies, enough resources, teamwork, and the additional use of pharmacies may help Canada respond more effectively to future viral outbreaks. However, more research is needed, particularly research with Canadian people who make decisions in the government, healthcare professionals, and populations who may have more difficulty receiving antivirals.