

What could improve the prescribing and use of antivirals?

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Why do we need to know about prescribing and taking of antivirals?

Antiviral medicines can help prevent serious illnesses from respiratory viruses such as influenza (the flu). They are especially important for people who are more likely to become very sick if they get the virus, for example, older adults and people who are pregnant.

Canadian and international guidelines recommend antivirals to prevent and treat influenza in certain situations, such as when there is a quick and large increase in people with influenza. However, not everyone who could benefit from antivirals gets them. Healthcare professionals, such as doctors, nurses, and pharmacists, may face challenges when deciding whether to prescribe antivirals. Patients may face challenges when trying to get or take these medicines.

This review looked at what influences: 1) healthcare professionals to prescribe antivirals; and 2) patients to take them.

What did we learn?

We found several things that may help improve antiviral prescribing and use.

1) Prescribing of antivirals:

- **Clear guidance.** Healthcare professionals wanted clear and consistent information about when antivirals should be used (and not used). This was especially important in situations where there was uncertainty, such as treating women who are pregnant. Guidance should also help identify people who are most likely to benefit from antivirals;
- **Readily available information.** Some healthcare professionals were unsure about the benefits and risks of antivirals. Easy-to-read summaries of the evidence and educational resources may help them make prescribing decisions;
- **Rapid testing.** Easy access to tests, especially rapid tests such as the rapid influenza test, can help healthcare professionals decide whether antivirals are needed, or not;
- **Training and support.** Healthcare professionals with less experience prescribing antivirals may benefit from training and support from more experienced colleagues; and
- **Pharmacist support.** Pharmacists may be able to help more people get treatment. Giving pharmacists access to patient health information, fair payment for prescribing services, and encouraging teamwork with other healthcare professionals could help pharmacists provide better antiviral care.

2) Use of Antivirals:

- **Public education.** Patients may be more willing to take antivirals when they know who should receive them, how well they work, and what side effects they may cause. Public education may also help people understand that influenza and other respiratory infections could make them very sick and could be prevented with antivirals;
- **Reduced cost and improved access.** The cost of antivirals and difficulty accessing them can prevent people from getting treatment. Increasing access to publicly funded antivirals may help reduce these barriers; and
- **Alternative forms of consultations.** Telephone and video appointments may help people get antivirals, and get them more quickly.

How did we answer the question?

When studies are done, their results are published and stored in databases. We searched five databases to find studies on what influences antiviral prescribing and use. We then combined the data from the 47 articles that could help us answer the question. 33 studies looked at the views and experiences of healthcare professionals who prescribe antivirals, and 14 studies looked at the views and experiences of patients.

How confident are we about these findings?

The studies included in this review looked at different populations and healthcare settings. Most studies focused on healthcare professionals, while fewer studies looked at patients' experiences. In addition, more than half of the studies were conducted in the United States, while only 3 were conducted in Canada. Because of this, what we found may not apply equally to all healthcare settings or populations.

Overall, this review suggests that clear guidance, easy access to testing, support for healthcare professionals, public education, pharmacist involvement, affordable antivirals, and different types of medical appointments may help more people get the treatment they need. More research is needed to better understand how these strategies affect different healthcare professionals and specific patient groups (e.g., patients who are pregnant).