

Tamiflu: The First Line of Defense

Tamiflu, whose common scientific name is oseltamivir, is part of a family of flu fighting medicines called neuraminidase inhibitors. Tamiflu is used in the treatment of infections caused by both the influenza A and influenza B viruses. Tamiflu, which requires a prescription, can be used both to treat the flu if taken soon after symptoms appear, or to prevent the flu. The difference between Tamiflu and a vaccine is that Tamiflu helps your immune system be in a position to fight off the advance of the viral infection, whereas a vaccine is just a straight injection of dead influenza that causes your immune system to produce antibodies to fight off the virus itself.

Tamiflu demand has skyrocketed over the past year for several reasons. There was a shortage of available flu vaccine during flu season 2005, with in some cases only enough for senior citizens or those with more vulnerable immune conditions being able to get vaccinated. Also, the U.S. government was concerned that an outbreak of bird flu in the United States could leave the U.S. short on flu vaccines, causing them to hold back supplies just in case of an outbreak. However, the bird flu is different from human influenza.

Bird Flu is much harder to transmit than human influenza, requiring very close physical contact to spread the disease. Bird flu has been observed in countries where humans and animals are in close contact. There have been roughly 70 deaths worldwide and approximately 130 infections since 2005. The primary concern of health officials around the world is that bird flu will infect a person already carrying the human influenza strain, and that the two viruses will somehow swap genetic material, causing the bird flu to mutate into a virus that spreads much faster through the air, like human influenza, only this virus would be more deadly. A highly virulent strain of mutated bird flu could create a pandemic for the world, as did the Spanish Flu virus of the early 1900's that killed 20 to 50 million people worldwide.

The bird flu is associated with the influenza A strain H5N1 flu virus. Although not the same as the Spanish flu virus, the current avian flu strain does share many similarities with the Spanish flu strain. Initial studies have shown that Tamiflu may be effective in helping to fight the effects of this flu virus if the medication is taken very early after flu symptoms appear. As a result, the demand for Tamiflu has skyrocketed as consumers have rushed to their doctors to obtain prescriptions and gone online to buy the drug from internet pharmacies.

A Swiss drug maker, F. Hoffman La-Roche Ltd., currently has a tight hold on the manufacturing of Tamiflu. Biolyse Pharma Corp., when turned down in its bid to try to enter the Tamiflu marketplace, had decided as of December of 2005 to attempt to mass produce several tons of shikimic acid, which is the main ingredient in Tamiflu, from the needles of discarded Christmas trees, as well as other pine, fir, and spruce trees. Such trees are the main source of shikimic acid.

Oseltamivir, sold under the brand name Tamiflu, is one of several medications approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the treatment and prevention of influenza. Flu shots are still the best way to prevent someone from developing the flu, but as of right now there is no known vaccine for the bird flu. The CDC has announced that development of a vaccine has begun.

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About the Author

Jim Pretin is the proprietor of <http://www.consumersavingsrx.com>, a licensed online pharmacy that sells various FDA regulated prescription drugs, including Tamiflu.