



Public Health  
England

Health Protection and Medical Director:  
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Protecting and improving the nation's health

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PHE Gateway number 2014-423

**To:** Chief Executives NHS Foundation Trusts  
Chief Executives NHS Trusts  
Accountable Emergency Officers - EPRR provider organisations  
CCG Clinical Leads  
NHS England Regional Medical Directors  
NHS England Area Team Medical Directors  
Local Authority Directors of Public Health

**Cc:** CCG Accountable Officers  
Chief Medical Officer  
NHS England Medical Director  
[England.epr@nhs.net](mailto:England.epr@nhs.net)

Dear Colleague,

**Re: The use of antivirals for the treatment and prophylaxis of influenza**

Public Health England (PHE) has produced a summary of current guidance and evidence for healthcare professionals on the use of antivirals for the treatment and prophylaxis of influenza. It is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/seasonal-influenza-guidance-data-and-analysis>.

The key messages from the summary are:

- There is evidence that antivirals can reduce the risk of death in patients hospitalised with influenza;
- In the light of this evidence, it is important that doctors treating severely unwell patients continue to prescribe these drugs where appropriate;
- PHE continues to support the early use of antivirals for patients with proven or suspected seasonal influenza who are in high risk groups or who are considerably unwell, (even if not in a high risk group);

We have published this PHE summary following the 2014 Cochrane Review on the efficacy of antivirals in influenza. This review includes previously unpublished data, and adds to the evidence base for the treatment of influenza in some settings. However Cochrane Reviews consider evidence only from randomised control trials, which by

their nature are usually carried out in an otherwise healthy population in the community setting. The 2014 Review did not consider the substantial volume of observational data which has been gathered on the use of antivirals in the hospitalised population, which demonstrates a significant reduction in mortality, particularly when antiviral treatment is commenced early.

Although the findings of the 2014 Cochrane review were not substantially different to previous reviews, and there is no evidence to support a change to the existing guidance on the use of neuraminidase inhibitors, media reporting around the Cochrane Review 2014 publication suggested that antivirals are not effective for influenza. This may impact the prescribing of these important drugs.

It is essential that physicians treating severely unwell patients in any setting are not deterred from prescribing what may be lifesaving drugs as a result of confusion over efficacy in this situation; this is especially true for patients hospitalised with proven or suspected influenza.

As we approach the influenza season, we ask you to take steps to ensure there is clarity amongst local teams on current guidelines on, and the appropriate use of, antiviral drugs to ensure all appropriate influenza patients receive them.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Paul Cosford', with a horizontal line underneath it.

Professor Paul Cosford  
Director for Health Protection and Medical Director  
Public Health England  
[paul.cosford@phe.gov.uk](mailto:paul.cosford@phe.gov.uk)

## Further information

1. Link to PHE guidance: [The use of antivirals for the treatment and prophylaxis of influenza: PHE summary of current guidance for healthcare professionals.](#)
2. Link to PHE clinical guidance: [The treatment and prophylaxis of influenza: PHE guidance 2014-15.](#)
3. Link to Cochrane Collaboration 2014 review: [Neuraminidase inhibitors for preventing and treating influenza in healthy adults and children.](#)
4. Link to [Antivirals for influenza: where now for clinical practice and pandemic preparedness?](#) JS Nguyen-Van-Tam, Peter J M Openshaw, Karl G Nicholson. *The Lancet* 2014
5. Link to [Effectiveness of neuraminidase inhibitors in reducing mortality in patents admitted to hospital with influenza A H1N1pdm09 virus infection: a meta-analysis of individual participant data](#) Muthuri et al. *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* 2014
6. Link to [Oseltamivir for influenza in adults and children: systematic review of clinical study reports and summary of regulatory comments.](#) BMJ 2014;
7. Link to NICE guidance on [Amantadine, oseltamivir and zanamivir for the treatment of influenza](#)
8. Link to [Influenza: the green book](#), chapter 19