Department of Health & Social Care

Influenza Season 2019/20: Use of Antiviral Medicines

Reference: CEM/CMO/2019/04 ***Date of issue: 03 December 2019***

Surveillance data indicates an increase in influenza cases in the community. Prescribers may now prescribe and pharmacists may now supply antiviral medicines for the prophylaxis and treatment of influenza at NHS expense. This is in accordance with NICE guidance, and Schedule 2 to the National Health Service (General Medical Services Contracts (Prescription of drugs etc) Regulations 2004), commonly known as the Grey List or Selected List Scheme (SLS).

Antiviral medicines may be prescribed for patients in "clinical at-risk groups" as well as any who are at risk of severe illness and/ or complications from influenza if not treated.

Information on clinical at risk groups and patients eligible for treatment in primary care at NHS expense with either oseltamivir or zanamivir is available from:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influenza-treatment-and-prophylaxis-using-anti-viral-agents

Hospital clinicians should continue to prescribe antiviral medicines for patients whose illness is confirmed or clinically suspected to be due to influenza, in accordance with PHE guidance for the treatment of complicated influenza.



Professor Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer



Dr Keith Ridge
Chief Pharmaceutical Officer for England
Supporting NHS England, Department of Health and Social Care and Health Education England

Actions:

Who: Prescribers and pharmacies

When: With immediate effect

1

Prescribers working in primary care may now prescribe, and community pharmacists supply, antiviral medicines for the prophylaxis and treatment of influenza.

2

They are most effective if taken within 48 hours of onset of symptoms. It is important that pharmacists ensure antiviral medicines (AVs) are issued to patients promptly, to avoid treatment delay. If unable to fulfil the whole prescription, they should consider how best they can assist patient to gain timely access to AVs e.g. whether other community pharmacists locally have stock. If they do, either arrange for the patient to collect the stock from that pharmacy or get the stock transferred

3

All frontline healthcare workers should be vaccinated annually against influenza and observe appropriate infection control measures.

4

Clinicians should obtain rapid laboratory confirmation, with subtype identification for clinically suspected influenza in hospitalised patients, and not delay treating with antiviral medicines, in accordance with PHE guidance for complicated influenza.

Further information:
It is important that adults and children start taking oseltamivir within 48 hours of onset of symptoms. For zanamivir, treatment should begin within 48 hours of onset of symptoms for adults and within 36 hours of onset of symptoms for children who are 5 years of age or over.

Children over 12 months and adults who are not able to swallow capsules can be prescribed oral oseltamivir suspension.

Prescribing for children under 12 months: Oseltamivir is indicated in children including full term neonates who present with symptoms typical of influenza, when influenza virus is circulating in the community. Efficacy has been demonstrated when treatment is initiated within two days of first onset of symptoms.

The summary of Product Characteristics can be found on https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc

NICE guidance on the use of antiviral medicines can be accessed at: http://guidance.nice.org.uk/TA168 for treatment, and http://guidance.nice.org.uk/TA158 for prophylaxis.

PHE guidance on the use of antivirals in patients with complicated influenza, relevant to patients hospitalised with suspected influenza can be found at:: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/influenza-treatment-and-prophylaxis-using-anti-viral-agents (page 12)

The Department of Health and Social Care is liaising with manufacturers to ensure adequate supplies are available in the NHS.

Reports from PHE on influenza activity can be found on the GOV.UK website at https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/weekly-national-flu-reports#2019-to-2020-season

PHE guidance on Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures is available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/585584/RTI_infection_control_guidance.pdf

PHE guidance on Point of Care (POC) testing is available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/762344/point_of_care_tests_for_influenza_and_other_respiratory_viruses.pdf

Communication:
This alert has been issued directly to healthcare provider organisations via the Central Alerting System (CAS).

NHS England Regional Teams have been asked to cascade this alert to community pharmacists.

NHS England/ Improvement and Public Health England will assist with cascading information to appropriate professional groups.