

Ask the pharmacist

Your pharmacist is the best (next to your doctor, of course) source of information on how to get the most from your treatments.

2009 influenza pandemic – no need to panic yet!

Q: Now that WHO has declared a flu pandemic, what preventive measures should we take? What medication and supplements can I give to protect my child?

A: When the World Health Organisation (WHO) raised the influenza pandemic alert to phase six on 11 June 2009, it was the first flu pandemic of the 21st century.

At that time, 28,774 people in 74 countries had been infected with the novel A(H1N1) virus – first known as ‘swine flu’ virus when it emerged in late April 2009 – including 144 deaths. Then, Malaysia had 11 cases and our neighbouring countries Thailand (46 cases) and Singapore (21 cases) – with no deaths reported.

Flu-like signs and symptoms

- Fever above 40 °C (104 °F);
- Cough;
- Sore throat;
- Runny nose;
- Headache, muscle or joint pain; and
- Vomiting and diarrhoea (sometimes).

Who are vulnerable?

In contrast to the annual seasonal flu, most people have no or little immunity to the A(H1N1) virus; thus this new flu is spreading fast. Still, the severity of A(H1N1) flu is considered moderate. Many people have mild symptoms and they recover without antiviral treatment or medical care.

Those at high risk include:

- Younger people aged 10-45;
- Pregnant women; and
- People with chronic conditions (e.g. respiratory diseases or asthma, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, autoimmune disorders and obesity).

Preventive measures

- Wash your hands regularly – with soap and water, or alcohol-based cleanser;
- Avoid touching the nose, mouth and eye areas;
- Avoid crowded places;
- Maintain a one-arm distance (about 1m) from ill people;
- Improve airflow in your living space; and
- Practise good health habits (e.g. have adequate sleep, drink plenty of water and eat nutritious food and be physically active).

If you think you have the illness:

- Stay at home and limit close contact with others;
- Rest and take plenty of liquids;
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing;
- Use a mask if you need to travel or when around others; and
- Seek medical advice, if needed (e.g. if you have difficulty breathing, notice fast breathing in a young child, persistent fever for more than three days or seizures).

Treatment

The antiviral drugs against A(H1N1) virus are oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza). Only your doctor can prescribe these drugs, if required.

The medications for symptomatic relief include:

- Anti-fever drugs (e.g. paracetamol);
- Analgesics (pain reliever) for aches – but use non-aspirin type for children and young adults; and
- Antihistamines for runny or stuffy nose.

There is no scientific data supporting the use of dietary supplements to treat flu. Traditionally, people take the following supplements to boost immunity and reduce stress when ill:

- Vitamin C;
- Vitamin B-complex; and
- Herbs (e.g. Echinacea, Goldenseal and garlic). **OH!**