N.J. pharmacists face shortage of liquid Tamiflu, offer alternative

By Alexi Friedman/The Star-Ledger
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Pharmacists in New Jersey and across the country are dealing with the shortage of pre-bottled liquid Tamiflu by creating their own compound for the formula using Tamiflu capsules and sweet syrup.

The outbreak of the H1N1 virus and an early seasonal flu has caused a spike in demand for the antiviral prescription medicine, said John Norton, a spokesman for National Community Pharmacists Association. While compounding is not an unusual practice among pharmacists, it is often done when no commercial alternative exists. Pre-bottled liquid Tamiflu has always been readily available.

"There’s definitely a big increase in (requests for) the liquid Tamiflu compound," said Norton, whose group represents more than 20,000 independent pharmacies across the country, including 650 in New Jersey.

Because a vaccine for H1N1, or swine flu, is also in short supply, "parents are running to pharmacies to get the liquid Tamiflu," he said. The formula reduces the severity of the virus and is for children or anyone else unable to swallow the adult capsules. Chain pharmacies like Walgreens and CVS also create the compound.

At Panther Valley Pharmacy in Allamuchy, Anny Chan was ready when the H1N1 virus and seasonal flu hit. Like other pharmacists, Chan had already stocked up on the anti-viral Tamiflu capsules. Using guidelines set by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Chan has been creating the liquid formula using crushed-up capsules and cherry syrup, a process she said that takes about 20 minutes for a 10-dose bottle.

Though the winter flu season is not quite under way, demand for liquid Tamiflu at Panther Valley is way up, co-owner Bob Eberle said. He called the confluence of H1N1 and seasonal flu, "the perfect storm."
New Jersey pharmacists are using a federally approved alternative to Tamiflu to deal with the shortage issue.

The neighborhood pharmacy in Warren County has filled dozens of prescriptions for liquid Tamiflu in the last few weeks, including those for parents of children at an area school that registered a case of H1N1, Eberle said.

New Jersey has seen a steady increase in the amount of prescriptions filled for liquid Tamiflu, said Harvey Maldow, CEO of the New Jersey Pharmacists Association.

In late October, the government released its remaining 234,000 doses of liquid Tamiflu from a national stockpile. More supplies from Roche, the manufacturer, aren't expected until next month.

Because the H1N1 virus qualifies as a national health emergency, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued an emergency use authorization for Tamiflu, relaxing some of the prescription rules and allowing some expired but still effective products to be used.

Children are at higher risk for catching H1N1 and developing serious complications. Since April, 540 children nationwide have died from the H1N1 virus, according to the CDC. Another 15 children have died from a non-specific flu virus.

On average, between 50 and 100 children die from seasonal flu each year.

While most people who catch H1N1 won't need Tamiflu, the drug can be taken within 48 hours after symptoms start, to reduce the severity of the illness.

Alan Brown, pharmacist and owner of Liberty Drug and Surgical in Chatham, has filled hundreds of prescriptions for liquid Tamiflu in recent weeks, using the capsule-liquid compound.

That number represents a dramatic increase from this time last year, he said, when winter flu hadn’t hit. The compound, he said, takes pretty good.

"Kids are not going to spit it out," Brown said.

Because of the time it takes to mix the adult Tamiflu capsule into liquid form, some big chain pharmacies have steered their customers to Liberty Drug, Brown said.

Others, like Walgreens, say nearly all its stores will make the compound. At CVS, pharmacists will mix Tamiflu "to make a liquid version when clinically appropriate," said Michael DeAngelas, a spokesman for the company.

Health officials have encouraged pharmacists to create the Tamiflu syrup compound, which is time-consuming and requires adjusting the dosage from capsule to liquid form.

Pharmacies generally charge about the same price for the liquid compound as for the regular liquid Tamiflu — about $90 without insurance — although the cost may be more in some places because of the added labor.

For Jim Cammarata, a pharmacist who runs the Valley Pharmacy in Pluckemin, Somerset County, the demand for the compound began about a week ago. He was ready, he said, with 200 boxes of the capsules compared with the usual six boxes he keeps in stock.

Cammarata, who has been in business for 19 years and is president of the Garden State Pharmacy Owners, said it’s the first time he’s had to compound liquid Tamiflu. "I know the procedure," he said. "Once you know it, it’s easy."

McClatchy-Tribune Information Services contributed to this report.

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