Are new oral anti-COVID-19 drugs effective?

What the research says
The oral antiviral agents molnupiravir and ritonavir-boosted nirmatrelvir (Paxlovid) are approved for use in the UK (MHRA, 4 November 2021; MHRA, 31 December 2021), and both agents have been granted emergency use authorisation for use in the USA (CDC 2021), in patients with mild to moderate COVID-19 who are at the beginning of symptom onset and at higher risk of progression to severe disease. Systemic oral steroid treatment (dexamethasone, prednisolone, methylprednisolone, hydrocortisone) is recommended for in-hospital or advanced care at home of patients with COVID-19 illness (WHO 2020). Evidence is emerging that high-dose oral steroids may reduce the risk for severe hypoxia in COVID-19 illness (WHO REACT Working Group 2020). Oral agents approved, with limited evidence of efficacy and that are under evaluation for the treatment of patients with COVID-19 in the community care setting are shown in the Table below.

What this means for your clinical practice

- The oral antiviral agents molnupiravir and ritonavir-boosted nirmatrelvir (Paxlovid) are approved for use in the UK and both have been granted emergency use authorisation* for use in the USA. There are currently no other guideline-recommended oral treatments for the management of the acute COVID-19 infection in the community setting although other treatments are approved for use in this setting [See our answer on COVID-19 treatments available for use in the community setting].
- Medicinal treatment of acute COVID-19 should currently focus on symptomatic relief.
  - Antipyretics, paracetamol or ibuprofen, can be used for the management of fever and pain, there is no evidence to suggest they halt progression to more severe disease.
  - Diarrhoea and nausea should be managed according to usual standard of care.
- Antibiotic prophylaxis is not advised and antibiotics should not be prescribed unless there is a clinical suspicion of a bacterial infection, the risk of which has been shown to be low.
- A number of new oral drugs are currently under investigation including antiviral agents, and fluvoxamine for the treatment of patients with COVID-19 in the community setting.

*An Emergency Use Authorization permits the use of a medical product that has either not yet received regulatory approval or has not received regulatory approval for a specific indication, to be used in an emergency situation to diagnose, treat, or prevent serious or life-threatening diseases or conditions.
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Useful links and supporting references


Authors

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