

ANTIBIOTICS and ALLERGIES

— do you have a true antibiotic allergy?



This information sheet describes what an antibiotic allergy is, why it is important to know if you have a true allergy and how you can find out.

- You may think a reaction such as feeling sick and vomiting after taking antibiotics is an allergy. However this is a side-effect of the medicine, rather than an allergic reaction.
- If you think you are allergic to an antibiotic, talk to your health care professional. They can assess whether it is an allergy or a side effect by asking you a series of questions. If you need further testing, you may be referred to an allergy clinic or specialist doctor.
- It is important to know if you have a true allergy or not so that you receive the best medication for your condition.

What are antibiotics?

Antibiotics are medicines used to treat or prevent the bacteria, or 'bugs', that can cause infections. They work by killing or stopping the growth of bacteria. Antibiotics do not work on infections caused by viruses.

What is an antibiotic allergy?

All medicines, including antibiotics, can cause allergic reactions. This happens when your body's immune system mistakes the medicine for something harmful. Your body then releases chemicals in response, which cause your allergic symptoms. Allergies can cause different reactions:

Mild or moderate reaction:

Symptoms of a mild or moderate allergic reaction can include hives (large, red, raised areas on the skin) and an itchy rash. These reactions are less serious and non-life threatening.

Severe reaction:

Severe allergic reactions are rare. They require urgent medical attention and can be life threatening. These reactions can happen immediately or take several days before they appear. Severe reactions include difficulty breathing, or feeling your throat or tongue swelling up. They can also cause you to have a high temperature or severe skin reactions (e.g. blisters).

Many people think they are allergic to an antibiotic, usually to a penicillin. **If you are allergic to one type of antibiotic, it does not mean you are allergic to all types of antibiotics.**

What are the side effects of antibiotics?

Antibiotics can cause side effects. That is why you should only take them when needed. Side effects can include stomach problems like unusually frequent and runny bowel movements (diarrhoea), feeling sick and vomiting.

ANTIBIOTICS and ALLERGIES

— do you have a true antibiotic allergy?



Who should I tell if I think I am allergic to an antibiotic?

If you have had an allergic reaction to any antibiotic, you should tell your doctor, giving as much information as you can about what happened.

It's easy to confuse an allergic reaction with a side effect. That is why it is important to talk to your doctor to avoid missing out on the best medication for you.

How can I find out if I have a true antibiotic allergy?

The best way to find out if you are truly allergic is to have an allergy assessment. The results of this assessment will help your doctor determine if your reaction is an allergy or not. If you don't remember the symptoms of the allergic reaction, your doctor may perform some further tests. There are different tests depending on the type of reaction and your allergy history. This may include an oral or skin test, and are usually performed at a specialist clinic or in hospital by a specialist doctor skilled in allergy testing. Results from these tests should be added to your medical records.

Antibiotics and Allergies: Do you have a true antibiotic allergy?

Information for parents and carers

Released November 2019

© Clinical Excellence Commission 2019

SHPN (CEC) 190589

Around 9 out of 10 people who think they are allergic to an antibiotic find out that they are not after an assessment by their health care professional. This is because allergies can lessen over time, or they may not be truly allergic – and this means they can take that antibiotic safely.

Help prevent incorrect allergy labels

Knowing whether you are allergic to an antibiotic is very important to make sure the best antibiotic is given to you. If you think you have a history of an allergic reaction to an antibiotic, ask your doctor about how this can be reviewed.

Summary

- Always tell your healthcare providers if you have had an allergic reaction to an antibiotic
- Remind your healthcare provider of your allergy on every visit
- Document your allergy on your My Health Record
- Carry medical alert identification.

The CEC's Antimicrobial Stewardship Program aims to help NSW public hospitals use antibiotics safely.

For further information on the Antimicrobial Stewardship program, please visit

<http://www.cec.health.nsw.gov.au/patient-safety-programs/medication-safety/antimicrobial-stewardship/quah>