

Antibiotic allergies and side effects

This document should not replace the advice of your relevant healthcare professional.

Many people report allergic reactions to antibiotics, especially to penicillin. It is important to talk about your antibiotic allergy with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse to make sure you can take the right antibiotic safely when you need it.

What is an antibiotic allergy?

Sometimes a reported antibiotic allergy is a “side effect” and not a “true allergy”. A “true allergy” and a “side effect” are different.

An antibiotic allergy happens when the body’s immune system overreacts to an antibiotic it does not like. When this happens, the immune system produces allergy symptoms. An antibiotic allergy can be serious (life-threatening) or mild.

“True allergies” to antibiotics include:

- Anaphylaxis (a serious, life-threatening allergic reaction to substances such as medicines, food or insect bites). Symptoms or signs of anaphylaxis include:
 - very low blood pressure
 - weak and/or rapid pulse or heartbeat
 - rash with other symptoms, developing quickly after exposure to the substance
 - swollen lips or tongue

If you experience any signs or symptoms of anaphylaxis, you should immediately call 000 for urgent medical assistance.

- Other rashes

It is important to tell your doctor if you know you have an antibiotic allergy

What is an antibiotic side effect?

All medicines, such as antibiotics, can cause side effects. This is why you should only take antibiotics when needed. A side effect does not involve the body’s immune system. Antibiotic side effects are common.

Side effects to antibiotics include:

- itch without rash
- nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea or an upset tummy
- headache
- thrush

Have you experienced an antibiotic allergy or a side effect?

Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse will work with you to find out if your reaction was a side effect or a true allergy. You will be asked questions and it is important you give as much information as possible. **If you are allergic to one type of antibiotic, it does not mean you are allergic to all types of antibiotics.**

Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse will let you and your usual doctor(s) know whether your reaction to the antibiotic was a side effect or an allergy. Your medical record will also be updated.

Do I need to have allergy testing?

If you have reported a side effect to the antibiotic, you do not need to have an allergy test. Based on the information you provide to your doctor, pharmacist or nurse, an allergy assessment may sometimes be required to determine if you are truly allergic to an antibiotic.

What can I do if I have had an antibiotic allergy side effect?

You should not “label” yourself as allergic to an antibiotic if you have had a side effect. Doing this could stop you from getting the best antibiotics for a future infection.

You should always tell your doctor or pharmacist if you think you have had a side effect to an antibiotic. Many antibiotic side effects can be safely treated so you can finish the antibiotic course prescribed by your doctor.



Contact information:

Organisation

Phone number

In the event of an emergency, please dial 000 for an ambulance or go to your nearest hospital emergency department.