

UNDERSTANDING ANTIBIOTIC ALLERGIES



Peter Mac
Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
Victoria Australia

Many people report allergic reactions to antibiotics, especially to penicillin. To make sure you are taking the right antibiotic safely, it is important to discuss your antibiotic allergy with your doctor.

What is an antibiotic allergy?

Many patients report an antibiotic allergy, especially toward penicillins. An antibiotic allergy can be serious (life threatening) or mild.

Allergies to antibiotics can include:

- anaphylaxis
- very low blood pressure
- weak and/or rapid pulse or heartbeat
- rash
- swollen lips or tongue.

If you experience any of the above signs, it is important to talk to your doctor.

Understanding your antibiotic allergy will help ensure you receive and take antibiotics safely at all times.

Testing for antibiotic allergies?

One in four hospital patients believe they have an antibiotic allergy. Often, many of these are 'false' or not true allergies.

Having a test is the only way to know if the allergy is real or not. We have found that after testing, eight of ten people who report an antibiotic allergy, are found **not** allergic.

It is also important to test allergies to make sure the antibiotics you are given are the safest and best ones for your needs.

What are the types of antibiotic allergy testing?

If you have reported an antibiotic allergy, we may ask you to have an antibiotic allergy test.

Antibiotic tests include a:

- skin prick test
- oral test dose
- or both.

Skin testing is a safe process. It is called a skin test, where you are given a tiny injection of antibiotic just under the skin. This will show us if you are still allergic.

If the skin test is negative you may be given an oral test. In the oral test you will be asked to swallow a small dose (small amount) of the antibiotic to see if you have an allergic reaction. For some patients they may go straight to a test dose of antibiotic based on their allergy history.

You will be closely watched and monitored during both tests.

If, during the test, you do have a reaction, the test will stop immediately. If this happens, our specialist doctors and nurses, highly trained in managing allergies, will treat you.

What happens after antibiotic allergy testing?

If the test at Peter Mac shows an antibiotic allergy, you and your doctors will be notified.

You will each receive a letter explaining:

- your results
- what antibiotics are safest and best for you
- the antibiotics to take for which infection(s).

If your test shows you **no longer** have an allergy we will let you and your doctors know. All results will be placed in your Peter Mac medical history.

Does everyone have the test?

No, not everyone will be tested. Your specialist doctor may ask you to have the test if they think there is a chance you are no longer allergic to the antibiotic.



For more information

For more information or advice about this factsheet or your hospital stay, please call the Peter Mac Infectious Diseases Department on **(03) 8559 7999** from Monday to Friday between 8:30am to 4:00pm.

For more information about Peter Mac, please visit www.petermac.org