

## Antibiotic Allergies and Side Effects

Information about differences between antibiotic allergies and side effects.

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.

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

### What is an antibiotic allergy?

Many people report allergic reactions to antibiotics, especially to penicillin. Sometimes the reported reaction is a “side effect” and not a “true allergy.” An allergy and a side effect are different.

An antibiotic allergy happens when the body’s immune system reacts 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 foreign substances such as some medicines, food or insect bites)
- very low blood pressure
- weak and/or rapid pulse or heartbeat
- rash
- swollen lips or tongue.

### What is an antibiotic side effect?

All medicines such as antibiotics can cause side effects. 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?

The doctors, pharmacists or nurses in your healthcare team 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 can give as much information as possible.

Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse will let you 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.

## 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 any 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 treated so you can finish the antibiotic course prescribed by your doctor.



For further information please visit:

<https://antibioticallergy.org.au>

Email: [antibiotic.allergy@austin.org.au](mailto:antibiotic.allergy@austin.org.au)

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