

ANTIBIOTIC ALLERGIES AND SIDE EFFECTS



Peter Mac
Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
Victoria Australia

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?

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, 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?

Your Peter Mac 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 healthcare team will let you and your doctors 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.

More information

For more information, please visit:

<https://antibioticallergy.org.au>



Contact us

For more information or advice about this factsheet, please call the Infectious Diseases Department on 8559-7477 from Monday to Friday between 9:00am to 4:00pm.

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