

ANTIBIOTICS AND ALLERGIES

INFORMATION
FOR PATIENTS/
CLIENTS/RESIDENTS
AND CARERS

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.



1. It is important to know **if you have a true allergy or not** so that you receive the best medication for your condition.
2. You may think a reaction such as feeling sick and vomiting after taking antibiotics is an allergy. However **this could only be a side-effect** of the medicine, rather than an allergic reaction.
3. If you think you are allergic to an antibiotic, **talk to your treating doctor**, nurse or pharmacist. 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.

WHAT IS AN ANTIBIOTIC?

Antibiotics are medicines that are used to treat or prevent infections. They work by killing or stopping the growth of 'bugs' (bacteria or fungi) that may be causing a problem in your body. Antibiotics do not work on infections caused by viruses. Antibiotics can be given in different ways, and are commonly provided as tablets, syrups, injections, or eye drops. At the time of prescribing antibiotics, your doctor will discuss your individual needs and recommend a suitable product.

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 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). These reactions can happen immediately or take several days before they appear. They require urgent medical attention and can be life threatening.

If you are allergic to one type of antibiotic, it does not mean you are allergic to all types of antibiotics.

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 treating 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.

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.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I HAVE A TRUE ANTIBIOTIC ALLERGY?

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

Clinical Excellence Commission (CEC) (2019). Antibiotics and Allergies: Do you have a true antibiotic allergy? Information for Patients and Carers.

DISCLAIMER: This leaflet is provided for information only. It is not intended to substitute for medical advice and should not be used to determine actual treatment choices or decisions.



Consumer Endorsed
Patient Information Publication

