



## Allergic to Penicillin?

Only 1 in 10 people with a penicillin allergy on their medical records **truly** have an allergy

The 9 out of 10 who are not truly allergic to penicillin **may be at risk of harm** from not being given a penicillin to treat their infection. This is because...



The alternative antibiotics we use for people with penicillin allergy may not work as well, and increase risks of developing side effects and difficult-to-treat infections.



People with penicillin allergy on their medical records spend longer in hospital, and need more medication to be given intravenously through a drip.



Penicillin allergy is lost over time, after 5 years 50% are resolved, increasing to 80% after 10 years.



Side effects like diarrhoea and nausea are not nice, but they are not allergies, and will usually pass once the course of treatment is finished.



Sometimes symptoms of the infection (e.g. rash) can be misinterpreted as an allergic reaction.



Ask your healthcare professional  
“Do I **really** have a penicillin allergy?”

#KeepAntibioticsWorking



## **Allergy to penicillin**

### **Information for patients**

#### **What is penicillin?**

Penicillin is a type of antibiotic. It works very well to treat common infections caused by bacteria, such as chest infections, tonsillitis, ear infections, sinus infections and skin infections.

Types of penicillin-based antibiotics include amoxicillin, flucloxacillin, co-amoxiclav and phenoxymethylpenicillin.

#### **What is penicillin allergy?**

An allergy is a reaction of your body's immune system. An allergy to penicillin causes a range of symptoms. For most people these symptoms are mild and do not need treatment.

Sometimes a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis can happen. This is rare, but it can be life-threatening. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include: a rash that spreads fast, swelling of the mouth, throat or tongue, breathing difficulties and collapse. Most people recorded as having an allergy to penicillin will not have had any of these symptoms.

Knowing if you are allergic to penicillin is important, to make sure that you are given the best antibiotic for you.

#### **How common is penicillin allergy?**

Around 6% of people in the UK are currently recorded as having an allergy to penicillin. However, evidence suggests that more than 9 out of 10 of these people are not truly allergic when tested.

#### **Why might your medical record show a penicillin allergy when you don't truly have an allergy?**

You might have been told that you had a reaction to penicillin as a child. This might have been a rash, which could have been caused by a viral infection and not an allergy or reaction to a penicillin antibiotic.

Sometimes, you might have had non-allergic side effects after taking penicillin. These could include: diarrhoea, feeling sick, being sick, indigestion, headache and thrush. These side effects are common to all types of antibiotics and do not show that you have an allergy to penicillin.

## **What are the risks of being allergic to penicillin?**

Penicillins are often the first antibiotics given to treat an infection. If your medical record shows you have a penicillin allergy, when you need antibiotics you must be given a different type of antibiotic to penicillin to treat the infection.

If penicillin allergy on your medical record is wrong, it could stop you being given the most appropriate medicine to treat an infection.

Evidence suggests that people with a recorded penicillin allergy stay in hospital for longer, and have a higher risk of:

- being readmitted to hospital
- surgical wound infections
- infections (such as MRSA) that are resistant to antibiotic treatment
- severe infections
- being admitted to intensive care.

If your medical record shows you have a penicillin allergy when you don't truly have one, you could miss out on the best and safest treatments for common bacterial infections and be at unnecessary higher risk of the conditions listed above.

## **How can I find out if I'm truly allergic to penicillin?**

Your GP practice is reviewing people whose medical records state that they have a penicillin allergy.

If you think your medical record might incorrectly suggest that you are allergic to penicillin, then please contact your GP practice to ask them about it.