

# Penicillin allergies

## Frequently asked questions

### What is a penicillin allergy?

A penicillin allergy is a reaction, caused by the immune system, triggered by penicillin. It can be mild, moderate or severe (life threatening).

Signs of an allergy may include:

- Rash
- Very low blood pressure and/or collapse
- Swollen lips or tongue
- Anaphylaxis (a serious, life threatening allergic reaction to foreign substances such as some medicines, food or insect bites)

### How is an allergy different to a side effect?

Antibiotic side effects are sometimes incorrectly called *allergies*. Side effects are not caused by the immune system.

All medicines can cause side effects.

Examples of side effects are: nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea, headache or dizziness, thrush  
*These are not allergies and it is safe for you to be prescribed that antibiotic again.*

### I have a family member with a penicillin allergy. Should I avoid penicillin?

A family history of penicillin allergies is not a reason for avoiding penicillin.

### I had a rash when I was a child after penicillin- should I avoid it now?

90% (9 out of 10) of reactions to penicillin are lost over time or may not have been caused by penicillin in the first place.

Many people who report a reaction in childhood are able to take penicillin as an adult.

### What should I do if I suspect a penicillin allergy?

**Seek medical attention.**

Write down exactly what happened and what antibiotic caused the problem.

Your doctor, pharmacist or nurse will work with you to find out whether you have an allergy and if it is a low or high risk allergy.

*Some people may be referred for allergy testing to clarify which antibiotics are safe to use in the future.*