

Information for patients and carers

Unnecessary Penicillin Allergy Labels On Patient Records

Three horizontal, wavy bands of blue color at the bottom of the page, with the top band being a lighter shade of blue and the bottom band being a darker shade.

What is a Penicillin?

Penicillin is a type of antibiotic, and there are a number of different types of penicillin. Widely used both in hospital and in the community, they are often the first choice for treating common infections such as pneumonia, skin and soft tissues infections and tonsilitis.

What is a penicillin allergy?

A penicillin allergy occurs when the body's immune system responds unusually to a penicillin type antibiotic.

Common examples of penicillin antibiotics include: FLUCLOXACILLIN, PHENOXYMETHYLPENICILLIN (also known as PENICILLIN V), AMOXICILLIN and CO-AMOXICLAV (also known as AUGMENTIN)

For most people an allergic reaction will be an unpleasant mild skin reaction or rash that develops slowly after several hours or days of taking the medication. Sometimes a more immediate and severe reaction can occur called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis is extremely rare but can be life-threatening.

People with anaphylaxis develop symptoms such as:

- A widespread itchy rash (like nettle sting)
- Breathing difficulties
- Swelling around the mouth, neck and upper respiratory tract

These symptoms often develop within minutes of taking a penicillin type antibiotic.

What is the difference between a medication allergy and medication side effects?

Any medications may cause unpleasant side effects such as mild skin reactions/rashes, vomiting or diarrhoea. Side effects are different to

allergic reactions. Having side effects to penicillin, whilst unpleasant, does not mean you need to avoid penicillin antibiotics completely. This is particularly true in severe infections where penicillin may be the best antibiotic. In these situations, it is often best to receive penicillin and manage side effects if these happen.

How common is penicillin allergy?

- Approximately 1 in 100 people have a genuine penicillin allergy
- Anaphylaxis, the most severe allergy, occurs in about 1 in 10,000 people taking penicillin, so it is extremely rare
- Despite real penicillin allergy being uncommon, about 1 in 10 people have been told or have assumed they have a penicillin allergy
- Around 90% of people recorded as having a penicillin allergy are not actually allergic

I have had a recorded penicillin allergy for a long time. Why should that change now?

Penicillins are very effective treatments for many common infections. They are also commonly used in patients having a surgical procedure. Being unable to take penicillin may put you at a disadvantage especially if you are admitted to hospital with a severe infection.

What are the benefits to me of finding out whether I am allergic to penicillin antibiotics?

A hospital test can show that you are not allergic. If your test results show that you are not allergic to penicillin, then your medical records will be updated. Removing the penicillin allergy label from your record means you can receive penicillin safely and that more treatment options are available if you have an infection or require antibiotics prior to surgery.

What does the test for penicillin allergy involve?

Your medical team will ask you about the symptoms you have had in the past that led to the penicillin allergy label. If they decide you may have been incorrectly recorded as having an allergy, they will offer you a test to decide if the allergy label can be removed. You will only be offered this test if the medical team believe that it is safe to do so and there is a very low chance of an allergic reaction. The test involves giving you a penicillin antibiotic tablet under careful supervision in hospital. Your pulse and blood pressure will be monitored for one hour after you take the tablet.

What happens after the test?

At the end of the test the medical team will discuss with you what your test results mean. If you have not experienced any reaction, a letter will then be sent to your GP informing them of the result. Your GP will be asked to remove the penicillin allergy label from your GP record. We will also give you an information leaflet explaining the results and what they mean for your future care. Should you need an antibiotic in the future, then your doctor will have the option to use a penicillin antibiotic.

If the test confirms that you are allergic to penicillin, then we will advise your GP of the result and ask them to record this in your GP record. We will also give you a leaflet about avoiding penicillin in future.

Do I have to take this test?

If you do not want to be tested let the medical team know. Your decision will not affect your ongoing care.

Are there any risk or side effects?

There is a small chance that you may experience an unpleasant side effect such as nausea or an allergic reaction. Allergic reactions are typically mild but a severe allergic reaction, although highly unlikely, is possible. You will be closely monitored by staff during the test and in the

unlikely event you experience a severe allergic reaction, the medical team will give you treatment to reverse the reaction.

What will happen if I do agree to have the test?

One of the medical team will ask you to read and sign a permission form indicating your consent to proceed with the test. The doctor will also sign this form, and it will be retained in your medical notes as a record of your agreement to the test.

What will happen if I do not have the test?

If you do not have the test, then your medical notes will continue to state you are allergic to penicillin and you will not be given penicillin when you are treated for an infection or have a surgical procedure in the future. You can re-consider having the test at any time.

Sources of further information

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk

www.nhs.uk

www.accessable.co.uk

www.patient.co.uk

www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/veteran-aware

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www.lancsteachinghospitals.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets

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If you want to stop smoking, you can also contact Smokefree Lancashire on Freephone **08081962638**

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This information can be made available in large print, audio, Braille and in other languages.

Our patient information group review our leaflets regularly, if you feel you would like to feedback on this information or join our reading group please contact on email address:

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