

RULING OUT PENICILLIN ALLERGIES



You may not be allergic to this common antibiotic after all.

DID YOU KNOW that as many as 90 percent of patients with a penicillin allergy are incorrectly diagnosed? What's more, penicillin allergies do not run in families. Symptoms like stomachache or fatigue may be attributed to an allergic reaction when they may be caused by an infection.

"Children with viruses or bacterial infections are often given amoxicillin and subsequently develop a rash assumed to be caused by the antibiotics," says **Cascya Charlot, M.D.**, chief of the pediatric allergy and immunology at NewYork-Presbyterian Brooklyn Methodist Hospital. "However, infections often cause a rash in children that is completely unrelated to the medication given."

Incorrectly diagnosing patients with penicillin allergies can lead to overuse of broad-spectrum antibiotics, which contributes to a wider issue called antibiotic resistance. Antibiotic resistance leads to the development of new superbugs that can make people who contract them seriously or even fatally ill.

TEST YOUR TOLERANCE

A straightforward test exists for patients who want to know if they can tolerate penicillin. As sensitivity to penicillin can decrease over time, Dr. Charlot suggests everyone labeled with a penicillin allergy be tested.

"Penicillin is used to prick the skin, and the patient waits 20 minutes to see if a reaction develops," Dr. Charlot says. "If there is no reaction, the penicillin is injected underneath the skin. If that test is negative, the patient receives a dose of amoxicillin in the office and is observed for at least an hour."

Dr. Charlot recommends that people be proactive about testing, as the test cannot be performed on anyone who is sick.

"Medications in the penicillin family are powerful and effective," Dr. Charlot says. "If avoidance of penicillin is no longer necessary for a patient, more options open up."