Penicillin allergy

azdelta

Uw ziekenhuis.

Dear patient,

You may have an allergy to penicillins. This brochure provides more information about your risk of a penicillin allergy and which tests are recommended to confirm or rule out your allergy. You will also find information on the importance of correct labelling, penicillin and penicillin allergy.

1 Possible allergy to penicillin

The screening revealed that you are possibly allergic to penicillin.

- Do you no longer remember what reaction you had after taking penicillin antibiotics? If so, you have a low risk of an allergy and an additional tolerance test is recommended.
- Do you remember any allergic symptoms you had after taking penicillin antibiotics (e.g. skin rash, itching, difficulty breathing, swelling of your lips/face/throat/tongue)? If so, there is a good chance that you have an allergy.
- Did you end up in the emergency department after taking penicillin antibiotics? If so, there is also a good chance that you have an allergy.

2 Low risk

If you have a low risk of a penicillin allergy, further testing is recommended through an oral **tolerance test**. While waiting for the results of this tolerance test, we have adjusted the label in your record so that other healthcare providers know that this allergy label has not yet been confirmed.

Tolerance test

A tolerance test consists of a short stay in the outpatient clinic where you will take one pill of a penicillin antibiotic (1 gram of amoxicillin). You will stay in the hospital approximately an hour for observation in safe, controlled conditions. The specialist physician (= allergologist) will come to check whether or not you have an allergic reaction.

In rare cases, you may not get a reaction until a few days later at home. Or after taking several doses of penicillin. In this case, you must inform the allergologist.

If you do not develop an allergic reaction during this test or do not have a delayed reaction, then you are not allergic to penicillin and the label can be removed from your record. These antibiotics can be taken safely without any problems.

If you did develop an allergic reaction, then you are allergic to penicillin. This will be noted in your record.

The cost of a tolerance test
The tolerance test costs EUR 25 (a short stay in the outpatient clinic and one pill of a penicillin antibiotic). The patient contribution for a consultation with the allergologist costs EUR 12. If you have any questions about the costs, please contact the invoicing department on 051 23 76 66.

Facts

- 15% of all patients report having a penicillin allergy.
- > 90% of these patients were eventually found not to be allergic to penicillin.

Why is this?

- Many patients were labelled as having a “penicillin allergy” in childhood after showing a side effect caused by the antibiotic taken. A side effect is often mistaken for a true allergy.
- Patients can grow out of their allergy. If the allergy dates back more than 10 years, chances are that it is no longer an allergy.

3 Medium or high risk

If you have a medium or high risk of a penicillin allergy, we recommend further investigation by a specialist physician (= allergologist). By carrying out additional tests, similar antibiotics can also be tested, in addition to the suspect type of penicillin. For patients with a penicillin allergy, it is possible to find a good alternative antibiotic.

4 The importance of a correct allergy label

Patients who claim to be allergic to penicillin are often prescribed other antibiotics for an infection. These alternative antibiotics can often carry more risks:

- More side effects
- A higher risk of other types of infections
- It is often more difficult to treat the infection
- Higher cost of the alternative antibiotics
- Longer hospitalisation

It is therefore important to know whether your “penicillin allergy” label is correct, so that you can get the most appropriate antibiotics in the future when you need them.

5 What is penicillin?

Penicillin is a type of antibiotic. Penicillin is part of a larger group of antibiotics commonly used to treat bacterial infections. This can be done through pills, injections or an infusion directly into the bloodstream. Antibiotics can be life-saving in some infections. Treatment with an antibiotic often causes discomfort (e.g. diarrhoea).



6 What is a penicillin allergy?

A penicillin allergy causes a hypersensitivity reaction. This means that our body's immune system reacts unnecessarily to penicillin. These hypersensitivity reactions can occur immediately, within hours of the first administration of a penicillin. Or it may be a late-onset allergy that only appears after several days or after several administrations of penicillin. These reactions may be accompanied by a skin rash, respiratory problems and a drop in blood pressure. Sometimes, they are life-threatening, such as if the throat swells.

A true penicillin allergy is not very common. Patients often experience gastrointestinal symptoms (diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting), a fungal infection or headache during their treatment with penicillin. These are not allergic symptoms, but side effects of the antibiotic. These side effects can occur with all types of antibiotics. This is because antibiotics also kill the good bacteria that always live on and in our bodies. This gives other harmful organisms a chance to multiply and then cause diarrhoea or fungal infections, for example.

Notes

Contact

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For more information on the project, contact the **HOST TRIaz website** (a collaboration between Sint-Andriesziekenhuis, Tielt, and Jan Yperman Ziekenhuis, Ieper):
https://triaz.be/host/activiteiten-en-projecten/delabeling-van-penicilline-allergie

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