

# Drug allergy

Information for the public

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[www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

## About this information

NICE guidelines provide advice on the care and support that should be offered to people who use health and care services.

This information explains the advice about drug allergy that is set out in NICE guideline 183.

## Does this information apply to me?

Yes, if you have, or think you have, a drug allergy. It may also be useful for family members or carers of people who have, or may have, a drug allergy.

## Drug allergy

All drugs can cause side effects (or 'adverse drug reactions'). These are listed in the patient information leaflet that comes with each drug. Less commonly, someone can have a drug allergy – an allergic reaction caused by the person's immune system. The NICE guideline on drug allergy only covers this type of reaction.

You can be allergic to any drug, including over-the-counter and prescribed drugs. You can have an allergic reaction to a drug even if you have taken it before without a problem. Some reactions happen within minutes of taking the drug, and they can appear in different ways – for example, a red itchy rash or swelling of the lips and around the eyes. Vary rarely someone can have a serious reaction called anaphylaxis. This affects breathing and blood circulation and can be life-threatening. A drug allergy can also trigger an asthma attack in people who have asthma. If you have a severe reaction, such as anaphylaxis or an asthma attack, you need to see a doctor straight away.

Other allergic reactions can take days or weeks to appear. They may develop more quickly though if you have had a reaction to the same drug before. Often reactions affect the skin. Sometimes they may cause symptoms from problems with the blood and internal organs such as the liver and kidneys.

## Your care team

A range of professionals who specialise in different areas of treatment or support may be involved in your care. These could include GPs, community nurses, pharmacists, accident and emergency department (A&E) staff, specialist nurses and consultant allergists (doctors who specialise in allergy care).

## Working with you

Your healthcare professional should talk with you about your drug allergy. They should explain any tests, treatments or support you should be offered so that you can decide together what is best for you. Your family members or carers can be involved in helping to make decisions, but only if you agree. Children and young people may need their parents or carers to be involved, depending on their age. There is a [list of questions](#) you can use to help you talk with your care team.

You may also like to read NICE's information for the public on [Patient experience in adult NHS services](#). This sets out what adults should be able to expect when they use the NHS. We also have more information on the NICE website about [using health and social care services](#).

## Contacting a healthcare professional if

## you think you have a drug allergy

If you think you are having an allergic reaction to a drug you should see a healthcare professional. This may be your GP or, for severe reactions, A&E staff. They should examine you and ask you questions about your symptoms. They should ask you how soon your symptoms started after you took the drug or how many doses you took, and whether you have had a similar reaction to that drug or type of drug before. They will need as much detail as you can give about the drug (bring the packaging if you can) and your reaction to it. They should also check that there is no other possible reason for your symptoms.

If your doctor thinks you might have a drug allergy they should discuss what this means with you (and your family members or carers as appropriate). They should also give you some written information about it. They will usually tell you to stop taking the drug and make sure you understand which drug or type of drug you need to avoid in future. This applies to any drug, whether it has been prescribed or bought over the counter. Check with a pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medicines, because they can contain several different drugs.

Your doctor will offer you advice and treatment if needed to help relieve your symptoms. If your reaction is severe you will be sent to hospital for treatment.

NICE has also produced advice about having emergency treatment for anaphylaxis. See [Other NICE guidance](#) for more information.

## Recording your suspected drug allergy

Your doctor should clearly state the following information about your suspected drug allergy in your medical records:

- the name (or names) of the drug or drugs thought to have caused the reaction
- the strength of the drug and what form you took it in (for example, tablet or liquid)
- how you were taking it (for example, by mouth or injection)
- how many doses you had taken or how long you had been taking the drug when symptoms started
- your symptoms

- why you were taking the drug
- the date and time of the allergic reaction
- which drug or drugs you need to avoid in future.

## When you need to go to a specialist drug allergy service

Your doctor might refer you to a specialist drug allergy service for tests and advice. This depends on the kind of reaction you had, how severe it was and if you have any other medical conditions. Your doctor should refer you if they think you have had anaphylaxis or a severe skin reaction to a drug. They should also refer you if you have a medical condition that means you need to take the same drug or type of drug that caused your suspected allergy. For more information about when you might be referred, see the section on [Specific drug allergies](#).

After you see a specialist, they should give you written information about:

- your reaction and the drug that caused it
- the tests you have had
- your diagnosis (whether you had an allergic reaction or not)
- which drug or drugs you need to avoid in future
- any safe alternative drugs you can use.

If the tests showed that your symptoms were not caused by an allergic reaction to a drug you should be told that you can take that drug again safely. All of this information should be added to your medical records.

## Sharing information about your drug allergy

You should always carry the information you have been given about your drug allergy with you and share it whenever you visit a healthcare professional. You (or your family members

or carers as appropriate) should be asked about any drug allergies every time you are prescribed, dispensed (for example, at a pharmacy) or are about to be given a drug. If this doesn't happen you should always volunteer this information, even if you're in hospital.

The drug allergy information in your medical records should be kept up to date and included in letters sent when you are referred or leave hospital.

## Specific drug allergies

### Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs

Some people are allergic to non-selective NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs). This group includes aspirin, ibuprofen, diclofenac and naproxen – commonly used drugs that reduce pain, inflammation and fever.

If you have a suspected allergy to non-selective NSAIDs, you should avoid taking them. Some over-the-counter medicines contain these drugs, so always check with a pharmacist and read all medicine labels carefully.

If you have had a mild allergic reaction to a non-selective NSAID but need an anti-inflammatory, your doctor could offer you a different type of NSAID (called a COX-2 inhibitor). You should discuss the risks and benefits with your doctor first. But if you need an NSAID and your reaction was severe, with symptoms such as anaphylaxis or an asthma attack, your doctor should refer you to a specialist drug allergy service.

Some people who have both asthma and nasal polyps (small tissue growths inside the nose) are likely to have an allergic reaction to NSAIDs. Your doctor can give you more information about this.

### Beta-lactam antibiotics

Beta-lactam antibiotics are a group of antibiotics that includes penicillin – talk to your doctor if you think you have an allergy to these and need treatment with an antibiotic. You should be referred to a specialist drug allergy service for advice on whether you are able to have beta-lactam antibiotics if you have a suspected allergy to them and:

- you need treatment for an illness that can only be treated by an antibiotic from this group **or**
- you are likely to need an antibiotic from this group frequently in the future (for example, if you often have bacterial infections or have a weakened immune system).

You may also be referred if you have a suspected allergy to beta-lactam antibiotics and to at least one other group of antibiotics.

## Local anaesthetics

Local anaesthetics are used to numb specific parts of the body during a medical procedure. You should be referred to a specialist drug allergy service if you need a procedure that involves a local anaesthetic that you are unable to have because of a suspected allergy to local anaesthetics.

## General anaesthetics

General anaesthetics are used to put you to sleep before surgery. If you have a suspected allergy to general anaesthetics, you should be referred to a specialist drug allergy service for advice on whether you are able to have these drugs.

## Questions to ask about drug allergy

These questions may help you discuss your condition or the treatments you have been offered with your healthcare team.

### About drug allergy

- Can you tell me more about drug allergy?
- How do I know whether my symptoms were caused by side effects or an allergic reaction?
- Should I stop taking the drug that has caused my reaction?
- Can I take the same drug again if it caused an allergic reaction? Would my reaction be worse next time?

- What drug or drugs do I need to avoid in future and what could I take instead?
- Can you suggest what I could keep with me to let people know about my drug allergy?
- Are there any support organisations in my local area that could help me?
- Can you provide any written information that I can share with my family members or carers?

## Finding out what's wrong (diagnosis)

- How can I find out for sure whether I have a drug allergy?
- What kind of information could I give my doctor to help diagnose my drug allergy (for example, photographs of my rash)?
- If you have referred me for specialist tests can you explain why?

## Sources of advice and support

- Allergy UK, 01322 619 898  
[www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org)
- Anaphylaxis Campaign, 01252 542 029  
[www.anaphylaxis.org.uk](http://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk)
- Asthma UK, 0800 121 6244  
[www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk)

You can also go to [NHS Choices](#) for more information.

NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

## Other NICE guidance

- [Anaphylaxis](#). NICE clinical guideline 134 (2011)

- Collecting information about medication on admission to hospital. NICE patient safety solutions guidance 1 (2007)

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## Accreditation

