

Self-Reporting a Penicillin Allergy Can Cost You

Nine out of 10 people who avoid penicillin are doing so unnecessarily.

Roughly 10 percent of the population self-reports having an allergy to penicillin or a penicillin-type drug, and the unintended consequences of these reports can be severe.

Over 90 percent of patients who self-report a penicillin allergy would test negative for the condition, meaning their bodies will tolerate penicillin without having an allergic reaction.

The cost of alternative care

The bigger problem is that a penicillin allergy is an often overlooked factor that contributes to antibiotic resistance, as healthcare providers will treat their infections with an alternative antibiotic when penicillin would be the drug of choice.

Receiving an alternative, non-penicillin antibiotic can result in higher costs of care, greater risk for adverse effects, and longer hospital stays. Alternative antibiotics will also encourage antibiotic-resistant bacteria to emerge.

How much of a threat is antibiotic resistance? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, antibiotic-resistant bacteria cause at least 2 million illnesses and 23,000 deaths in the United States annually.

Getting tested

Even young children, pregnant women, and critically ill patients can safely receive penicillin allergy skin tests, which can determine whether avoiding penicillin is necessary. Penicillin allergies are often diagnosed during childhood, when common infections may contribute to, or be confused with, an allergy. Even if you had a true allergy, over 90 percent of people grow out of this tendency by avoiding penicillin for 10 years or more.

If you think you're allergic to penicillin, talk to your doctor about getting tested. Undergoing appropriate diagnostic evaluation with a board-certified allergist will often lead to removing the diagnosis of a penicillin allergy.