

You Don't Have a Penicillin Allergy



By Alex Berezow — April 3, 2019



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

Every time I go to the doctor's office, I'm asked if I'm allergic to anything. "Penicillin," I say, dutifully. And I've been saying that every year since I can remember.

When I was a child, I had a persistent sore throat, and my mother gave me some amoxicillin (a penicillin derivative) for the infection. It did not go well. I broke out in a rash on my hands and feet, indicating an allergic reaction. Never again was I to receive penicillin.

Apparently, this isn't an uncommon story. About 10% of people report a penicillin allergy. However, only 10% of people who *think* they have it actually do.* The other 90% are mistaken. What's going on?

According to Dr. David McCullagh and Dr. Derek Chu, who provide an explanation in the [Canadian Medical Association Journal](#) [2] (as well as in an accompanying [press release](#) [3]), some people who had a bad experience with penicillin as a child mistakenly refer to it as an allergy when, in reality, it was some other type of intolerance.

Additionally, many childhood allergies wear off over time. If a person had an allergic reaction to penicillin more than 10 years ago, there's an 80% chance that he won't have an allergic response today. Therefore, people who claim a penicillin allergy ought to be tested for it. (The exception is for people who had a really bad reaction to penicillin, like what occurs in Stevens-Johnson syndrome. Those people shouldn't even be tested. For what it's worth, that's what my mom said I had.)

Why does it matter? Don't we have other antibiotics? Yes, but penicillin is a pretty good one. If a patient cannot take penicillin, he will be prescribed a different antibiotic, and that creates its own set of problems. According to the authors, penicillin allergy is:

"...associated with the use of costly and less effective secondline and broad-spectrum antibiotics, a 55% increased risk of acquiring methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, and a 35% increased risk of Clostridium difficile infection."

Those of you who automatically declare a penicillin allergy may want to consider getting a test to see if it's actually true. There's a convincing medical reason to do so.

**Note: If you're a Naked Gun fan, the [appropriate follow-up](#) [4] is, "Though there's only a 10% chance of that."*

Source: "David J. McCullagh and Derek K. Chu." Penicillin allergy. *CMAJ* 191 (8): E231.

Published: February 25, 2019. DOI: 10.1503/cmaj.181117

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[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penicillin#/media/File:PenicillinPSAedit.jpg>

[2] <http://www.cmaj.ca/content/191/8/E231>

[3] <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-dont-penicillin-allergy.html>

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDoncJckows>