

Drug Allergies

What is a drug allergy?

Reactions to drugs can occur with both prescription and non-prescription medications. Most reactions to drugs are expected side effects while only rarely are the reactions due to a true drug allergy. The two are commonly confused and misunderstood. Here's how you differentiate between the two:

What Causes a Drug Allergy?

Drug allergies can be due to either your genetic makeup or the way your body metabolizes a drug. These reactions usually occur after previously tolerating the drug, however they can also sometimes occur with the first dose. It is possible to outgrow an allergy to a drug over time.

Penicillin is a common drug allergy, however it is also a common drug allergy to lose over time. Even though you react to penicillin, you will not necessarily react to related drugs. Sulfa-based drugs are another common cause of drug allergy, however most people with sulfa-based antibiotic drug allergies do not react to non-antibiotic sulfa-based drugs.

What are Symptoms of Drug Allergy?

Allergic reactions to a drug can include either immediate or delayed symptoms involving itching, rash, hives, wheezing, shortness of breath, swelling of body parts, anaphylaxis, or lung, kidney, or liver damage. Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening reaction which happens immediately after taking the drug. This reaction can involve swelling of your body parts, hives, lightheadedness, loss of consciousness, wheezing, shortness of breath, or throat closure, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or shock.

How are Drug Allergies Diagnosed?

Drug allergies can be difficult to diagnose as they can look like other diseases and are sometimes difficult to discern between allergic and non-allergic symptoms. Skin testing is available for penicillin, however it is difficult to test many other drugs through this method. Drug challenges can be helpful if your allergist determines that an office based challenge would be appropriate for you. In this controlled environment, your allergist could monitor you for any signs of a reaction after being given increasing doses of the drug in question.

What are Treatment Options?

For a mild reaction, simply discontinuing use of the drug can stop the reaction. For serious, life-threatening reactions, your doctor may provide antihistamines, corticosteroids, or epinephrine.

Your physician may prescribe alternative medication for future use. If the drug you are allergic to is essential for your medical care, desensitization to the drug may be considered. This involves taking the drug in small but increasing amounts until you can tolerate the full dose. In order for desensitization to be effective, you need to continue to take the drug every day, or else you may lose tolerance. Desensitization does not work for all drug allergies.