

# Do you have the right prescription?

Allergies can be difficult to deal with at the best of times, but imagine being ill and in need of treatment, yet being allergic to the medication that could cure you.

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**A**ccording to a report published last year by the Royal College of Physicians, 'Drug allergy is increasingly common. Adverse drug reactions account for five per cent of all hospital admissions in the UK and up to 15 per cent of inpatients have a hospital stay prolonged as a result of drug allergy.' But these statistics are only thought to account for a minority of allergies to medication, as many more are diagnosed by doctors or remain unrecognised.

Allergic reactions to medications usually occur due either to an immune system response, or as a result of histamine release in the body being triggered by non-immune mechanisms, explained Dr. Adrian Morris, from the Surrey Allergy Clinic. Most reactions occur quickly, often within an hour, and include symptoms

such as itchy rashes, urticaria ('hives'), dizziness, difficulty breathing, swelling and a rapid pulse rate.

The problem with allergies to medication is that, in the majority of cases, no-one knows it's going to cause a problem until it does. This isn't a pleasant situation for a patient to be in. But unless there's a family or personal history of other medication allergies to provide clues of possible outcomes, there's not a lot that can be done to prevent it.

## Alternative drugs

If you do experience allergic reactions to medicines, there are usually alternatives available. 'The Erythromycin family of antibiotics are used for those allergic to Penicillin,' said Dr. Morris. In the case of anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, paracetamol can often be used instead.

As well as being allergic to drugs themselves, other allergy sufferers can experience problems when being prescribed medications. Many tablets, for example, contain lactose, which isn't suitable for people with a dairy allergy. In this instance, lactose-free tablets or liquid medications are available on request, so speak to your pharmacist.

If you have an allergy to medication, or have unknown symptoms and suspect an allergy may be the cause, always see your GP to get it checked out. 'It's important that a record is made of any allergy in your medical notes, so an alternative can be prescribed in the future,' explained a spokesperson for the Royal College of General Practitioners.

People with severe allergies may also benefit from wearing a MedicAlert bracelet, in case of accidents or emergencies, to ensure the problem is clear.

COMMON TYPES OF MEDICATIONS CAUSING PROBLEMS INCLUDE: Anaesthetics Opioid analgesics ACE inhibitors

Antis



Antibiotics Antiseptics Vaccines Aspirin and anti-inflammatory drugs Antibiotics Intravenous x-ray contrast fluids Insulin



## CASE STUDY

Having an MRI scan proved more of an experience than Mary Lynn Muloney had imagined when she had an allergic reaction to the tracer drug used in the scan.

**M**ary Lynn Muloney, who lives in London, fractured her hip when she was 38. The fracture didn't show up properly on x-rays and, as her doctors were also concerned as to why the hip was broken at such a young age, they decided to do an MRI scan. It was a routine scan that they perform daily and they didn't expect to encounter any difficulties.

'When they initially put me through the MRI everything went well,' she says. 'Then they took me out and injected gadolinium into my body to be used as a tracer. When I went back inside the MRI tube I could feel my eyes starting to itch. Then my skin became itchy as well,' she explains. She'd had a bad allergic reaction to another trace dye several years before and as the symptoms increased she knew it was happening again.

'When I came out, I told the technician I was having an allergic reaction. He said it was highly doubtful, as nobody in his experience had ever had an adverse reaction to gadolinium, but suggested I sit down for a while just to be sure.'

It was a good job she did sit down and wait, as her symptoms soon increased in severity. 'I started to cough and developed breathing difficulties and my skin was flushed a deep red,' she says. 'It was a scary experience. There was no way to get the gadolinium out of my system, so I just had to hope they could treat me.'

A doctor was called to treat her and, he too, was amazed that she was having a reaction to the gadolinium. They gave her two shots of adrenaline and put in an IV line, but the symptoms persisted. After more adrenaline injections things began to calm down. 'It took a few hours for everything to return to normal, with my breathing recovering before my skin did,' she says. Even then, she had to remain in the hospital under observation for half a day.

Like other people affected by medication allergies, it's not just gadolinium that causes her problems. 'I had a mastectomy a few years ago, followed up with breast reconstruction surgery. When I had my mastectomy, I had a morphine pump, which didn't appear to cause any problems,' she explains. 'The pump was taken away after a day or so and a nurse injected the morphine

instead. I felt slightly itchy and thought perhaps it was an allergic reaction, but nothing else happened.'

However, during her second operation she reacted again to morphine, only on this occasion it was much worse. 'I developed huge red welts all over my skin,' she says. 'They gave me adrenaline injections again which appeared to calm things down. This time, however, it took a few days for the skin allergy to go.'

Although there are strong painkillers that can be used instead of morphine, should she require it in the future, she does worry about what could happen if she needs another scan. 'My fear is that I'll be in an accident and that I'll be given a shot of morphine for the pain!' she says. 'I now wear a medical alert bracelet with a hotline number on, so anybody who calls can be told that the allergies are severe.'

There are several other common allergies in her family and she's worried that her son may inherit them. 'He's already had some major allergic reactions to some traditional medicines such as Penicillin,' she says. 'So far he's only had horrible skin reactions, but I don't want him to go through what I did and have his breathing affected.' ■