

Facts about Penicillin Allergy Desensitization



What is desensitization?

Penicillin desensitization is a type of medical treatment. A trained medical professional administers small amounts of penicillin into your body to teach it to temporarily tolerate penicillin. Desensitization is performed in a hospital by a trained medical professional with supportive care available in case of a reaction.

Certain medications (e.g., antihistamines, prednisone, or medicines like prednisone) may interact with this treatment. Your provider will give you more guidance.

Who needs desensitization, and why is it important?

You might need penicillin desensitization if you have a confirmed penicillin allergy but penicillin is your only immediate treatment option.

Desensitization should not be performed in people with certain severe reaction types. Two of these reactions include severe skin peeling and blistering, known as Steven-Johnson's syndrome (SJS), or toxic epidermal necrolysis syndrome (TENS). Your health care provider will have more information on other severe reaction types.

What test doses should I expect?

You will be given very small, increasing doses of penicillin by mouth, through the vein, or in the skin over the course of several hours.

If there is no reaction, your provider will start you on penicillin.

What should I know after desensitization is performed?

- You must take penicillin exactly as prescribed without missing a single dose. Call your provider if you miss a dose.
- Watch for signs of an allergic reaction, which can include a rash, itching, swelling, wheezing, and difficulty breathing.
- **Desensitization is temporary. If you stop penicillin, your allergy may return after only a couple of days. Tell all your treating providers about your penicillin allergy.**

References:

1. CDC. Is It Really a Penicillin Allergy? <https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/community/pdfs/penicillin-factsheet.pdf>
2. Khan DA, Banerji A, Blumenthal KG, et al. Drug allergy: A 2022 practice parameter update. *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*. 2022;150(6):1333-1393. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaci.2022.08.028>
3. AAAAI. Penicillin Allergy FAQ. Updated Sept 2023. <https://www.aaaai.org/tools-for-the-public/conditions-library/allergies/penicillin-allergy-faq>