

Do you or someone you know suffer with medicine allergies?

Reference Number: ULHT-LFT-4047 v1

Issued: April 2025

Review Date: April 2027

Introduction

The following sections provide essential information about drug allergies and sensitivities for anyone visiting or being treated in our hospital. The aim of this information is to explain what drug allergies and sensitivities are, how to recognise their symptoms and seek help for them, how to distinguish between the two reaction types and why it is so important to keep an accurate record of your drug allergies and sensitivities. If you have any questions about any of the sections, please speak to a member of staff looking after you or refer to the link given below.

What are medicine allergies?

Allergies occur when the body's immune system inadvertently responds to one or more ingredients in your medicine because it falsely interprets them as a potential threat. This triggers your body's defence mechanisms, which causes the symptoms we know as an allergic reaction. These are usually localised, but they can be more widespread. In rare cases, they can trigger a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis. True allergic reactions are much less common than reported and anaphylaxis is even rarer.

What are medicine sensitivities?

Sensitivities occur when an individual is more susceptible to side effects of medicines than the general population. This is thought to be due to the individual's unique genetics and how this affects the complex interaction between their medicine and their body's systems. You can find a list of side effects for your medicine on the patient information leaflet inside your medicine's packaging. As a sensitivity does not involve the immune system, it is not a true allergic reaction. Whilst the side effects experienced by an affected individual may be unpleasant, they are not serious and often settle by themselves. If they persist, they can be managed by adjusting the dose of the medicine, substituting it with an alternative one, or by prescribing other medicines alongside to help manage any unpleasant side effects that you may be experiencing.

Did you know?

We conducted an audit within our hospital to review drug allergy and sensitivity records from inpatients on our medical and surgical wards. We found that more than two-thirds of all recorded 'allergies' were side effects of medicines or symptoms of the illness(es) being treated. Fewer than one-third of all recorded 'allergies' were true allergic reactions. This is significantly less than what is frequently reported by our patients.

What are the consequences of inaccurate allergy and sensitivity records?

If your allergy and sensitivity record contains 'allergies' that are not true allergic reactions it could:

- Limit your treatment options
- Expose you to alternative medicines which may carry a higher risk of true allergic reactions and even anaphylaxis
- Conflict with responsible use of certain medicines like antibiotics, which must be used sparingly to combat antibiotic resistance
- Take longer to complete administrative tasks as they involve going through all allergy and sensitivity records
- Conflict with our duty to keep accurate patient records

How to recognise a true allergic reaction to medicines

Symptoms usually occur rapidly within hours or days of using the medicine concerned. These may include one or more of the below symptoms, which may occur at the site of contact or affect a wider area of the body:

- Widespread red, swollen, itchy facial/body rash with or without blistering
- Facial/lip/mouth/tongue/throat swelling potentially making it difficult to speak, swallow and/or breathe
- Feeling sick or being sick

How to recognise an anaphylactic reaction to medicines

An anaphylactic reaction is a severe and potentially life-threatening reaction occurring rapidly within minutes or hours of an exposure to the causative medicine. Its effects are more widespread and can affect other body systems such as your respiratory and circulatory systems. This may cause:

- Difficulty breathing
- Wheezing
- Chest tightness
- Light-headedness
- Fainting
- Unconsciousness

What to do if you experience a true allergic reaction or anaphylactic reaction to medicines

If you or someone you know experience symptoms like a rash, mild swelling not affecting breathing or swallowing, feeling sick or being sick, stop using the medicine and seek advice from your GP, pharmacist or 111.

For more serious symptoms like difficulty breathing, wheezing, chest tightness, light-headedness, fainting and unconsciousness, seek immediate emergency care by calling 999 or visiting your nearest A&E department.

For more information or if you have any questions [please click on this link to go to the NHS.uk website](#).

United Lincolnshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust has worked with AccessAble to create detailed Access Guides to facilities, wards and departments at our sites.

www.accessable.co.uk/united-lincolnshire-hospitals-nhs-trust

United Lincolnshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust endeavours to ensure that the information given here is accurate and impartial.

If you require this information in another language or alternative format, please email the Patient Information team at ulth.patient.information@nhs.net