Penicillin allergies

What is a penicillin allergy?
A penicillin allergy is a reaction, caused by the immune system, triggered by penicillin. It can be mild, moderate or severe (life threatening).

Signs of an allergy include:
- Rash
- Collapse
- Swollen lips or tongue

Certain allergies can mean that some antibiotics should not be prescribed for you in future.

How is an allergy different to a side effect?
Antibiotic side effects are sometimes incorrectly called allergies.

All medicines can cause side effects.

Examples of side effects are:
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Headache or dizziness
- Thrush

These are not allergies and it may be safe for you to be prescribed that antibiotic again.

I have a family member with penicillin allergy.
Should I avoid penicillin?
A family history of penicillin allergies is not a reason for avoiding penicillin.

I had a rash when I was a child after penicillin—should I avoid it now?
Allergies to antibiotics may disappear over time. Many people who report a reaction in childhood are able to take penicillin as an adult.

Speak to your doctor for more information.

What should I do if I suspect a penicillin allergy?
Seek medical attention immediately.
Write down exactly what happened and what antibiotic caused the problem.

Some people may be referred for allergy testing to clarify which antibiotics are safe to use in the future.

This document should not replace the advice of your relevant health care professional.