

Chlorhexidine allergy

Chlorhexidine is an antimicrobial chemical used in some healthcare, household and cosmetic products that can cause allergic reactions. If you think you may be allergic to chlorhexidine, visit your GP who can refer you to an allergy specialist if needed.

What is chlorhexidine?

Chlorhexidine is a commonly used antiseptic and disinfectant that's used to kill harmful bacteria, fungi, and viruses. In most cases, it is safe to use and allergic reactions to chlorhexidine are rare, but they are becoming more common. This may be due to increased use of chlorhexidine containing products.

You can find chlorhexidine in various products including:

- **healthcare** products **usually** used in medical settings such as bladder irrigation solutions, central venous catheters, medical gels and skin swabs.
- **healthcare** products you **can** use at home, like mouthwashes, dental gels, and eye drops.
- **household products** such as disinfectant.
- **some cosmetic products** as it can be used as a preservative. Although chlorhexidine in cosmetics doesn't usually cause allergic reactions, it's not clear if these products might make people more sensitive to it in future.

What are the types of chlorhexidine allergy?

Delayed

The most common allergic reactions to chlorhexidine are delayed reactions where symptoms appear up to 72 hours later. This usually happens after exposure to the antiseptic on the skin.

Immediate

Immediate allergic reactions to chlorhexidine are uncommon but have been reported. Symptoms usually appear within minutes to an hour after exposure.

When chlorhexidine is given intravenously (for example during catheter insertion), symptoms typically start within minutes. When it is applied to the skin (such as before a

procedure) or to a mucous membrane (for example as a lubricating gel), symptoms may take longer to appear, usually within 10–50 minutes.

This factsheet focuses on immediate-type allergic reactions.

What are the symptoms of chlorhexidine allergy?

Symptoms can range from mild to severe.

Mild to moderate symptoms may include:

- a red raised itchy rash (known as hives or urticaria) anywhere on the body
- swelling in areas of the body in contact with chlorhexidine
- a tingling or itchy feeling in areas of the body in contact with chlorhexidine

More serious symptoms (anaphylaxis)

Chlorhexidine allergy can also lead to more serious and life-threatening reactions. This usually occurs when it enters the body through an opening of the skin during a medical procedure in healthcare settings. It is a well-recognised cause of anaphylaxis during surgery, and these reactions can sometimes happen suddenly and unexpectedly.

More serious symptoms are often referred to as the **ABC** symptoms and can include:

- **AIRWAY** - swelling in the throat, tongue or upper airways, hoarse voice, difficulty swallowing.
- **BREATHING** - sudden onset wheezing, breathing difficulty, noisy breathing, persistent cough.
- **CIRCULATION** - dizziness, feeling faint, sudden sleepiness, confusion, pale clammy skin, loss of consciousness or collapse.

The term for this more serious reaction is **anaphylaxis** (pronounced ana-fil-ax-is).

Most healthcare professionals consider an allergic reaction to be anaphylaxis when it involves difficulty breathing or affects the heart rhythm or blood pressure. Any one or more of the ABC symptoms above may be present.

In extreme cases there could be a dramatic fall in blood pressure. The person may become weak and floppy and may have a sense of something terrible happening. Any of the **ABC** symptoms may lead to collapse and loss of consciousness and, on rare

occasions, can be fatal.

[Read more about anaphylaxis.](#)

[Read more about what to do in an emergency.](#)

Getting a diagnosis

If you think you may be allergic to chlorhexidine, see your GP who can refer you to an allergy clinic for a specialist diagnosis. They can find a clinic in your area from the [British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology \(BSACI\)](#).

It's important to get a referral even if your symptoms were mild because it can be hard to tell if future allergic reactions could be more serious.

Once you get a referral, the consultant will discuss your medical history and symptoms with you. They might suggest skin prick tests and blood tests to help diagnose the allergy and work out how serious it may be.

Other types of skin tests called patch tests may be used for the diagnosis of allergic contact dermatitis.

[Read more about allergy testing.](#)

A history of other allergies, such as eczema, asthma, or allergic rhinitis (hay fever), does not appear to increase the risk of having chlorhexidine allergy.

Treating symptoms

Once you have a diagnosis, you can take steps to minimise the risk of having another reaction in the future. It's usually straightforward to avoid chlorhexidine. You will need to learn about your allergy and, if you are at risk of a serious reaction, wear a medical alert bracelet or pendant at all times. Tell any healthcare professionals you see about your allergy, so they know what products to avoid using.

People who are allergic to other things such as food or insect stings are sometimes prescribed [adrenaline](#) to carry with them at all times. This isn't usually needed for chlorhexidine allergy because it's unlikely you'll use chlorhexidine products that result in anaphylaxis without knowing it, although there are special cases where you might need to carry adrenaline. Your GP or allergy specialist will be able to advise you.

Avoiding chlorhexidine

If you are allergic to chlorhexidine, always read the label before you buy any healthcare, household or cosmetics products. All these products sold in the UK must provide a complete list of ingredients.

If you're buying healthcare products, such as creams for eczema or powders for athlete's foot, read the list of ingredients on the patient information leaflet inside the box, as not all ingredients are listed on the outside of the box. You can also check the ingredients list online at www.medicines.org.uk or talk to your pharmacist. Check the ingredients even if the product is labelled "hypoallergenic".

The presence of chlorhexidine is often not obvious, and labelling can be inconsistent. Look out for the terms:

- chlorhexidine
- chlorhexidine dihydrochloride
- chlorhexidine diacetate
- chlorhexidine gluconate
- chlorhexidine digluconate.
- CHX
- CHG (e.g. in dressings)
- AGB (e.g. on central venous lines)

Which products can contain chlorhexidine?

Examples of products that can contain chlorhexidine include the following, though this is not a complete list:

Healthcare products usually used in medical settings

- antiseptic wipes used by staff at blood donor centres
- bladder washouts
- catheters
- antiseptic creams
- antiseptic wipes and swabs
- antiseptic dressings and mesh

- lubricating gels used in medical procedures
- hand gels and hand wash solutions
- surface cleaning sprays and solutions
- mouthwash
- central venous lines

Healthcare products you use at home

- antiseptic mouthwashes - *some people (1 in 100) may get mild peeling or soreness inside the mouth when using chlorhexidine; if this happens, stop using it and speak to your dentist or doctor for advice.*
- antiseptic sore throat lozenges and sprays
- antiseptic toothpastes
- acne creams
- antiseptic powders, such as athlete's foot powder
- dental gels
- dental implants
- eye drops
- contact lens solutions
- multi-use creams and sprays, such as nasal sprays, which may include chlorhexidine as a preservative
- topical eczema creams, washes and emollients
- topical (skin) disinfectants

If you're uncertain, ask your pharmacist to help ensure over the counter products do not contain chlorhexidine.

Household products

- detergent
- disinfectant solutions

Cosmetic products

- skin washes, cleansers and makeup removers
- deodorants and antiperspirants
- hair conditioners
- sun creams

wet wipes

Chlorhexidine in medical procedures

Chlorhexidine can be used during medical procedures, for example to clean your skin or in gels used with urethral catheters. The most common causes of serious allergic reactions to chlorhexidine in healthcare settings are central venous catheters coated with chlorhexidine and urethral gels. People with chlorhexidine allergy should be able to tolerate other antiseptic products due to the lack of cross-reactivity.

- Whenever you are having a medical procedure, tell your healthcare providers about your allergy, including doctors, nursing staff, anaesthetists and dentists.
- **If you have a history of anaphylaxis, you should take care during hospital admissions due to possible inadvertent exposure to chlorhexidine and discuss personalised precautions with your healthcare team.**
- Any known allergies should be recorded in your medical records but mention your allergy every time you have treatment to make sure the health professionals treating you are aware of your allergy.
- Before having blood tests, ask if the antiseptic wipes used contain chlorhexidine.

Key messages

- If you think you may be allergic to chlorhexidine, speak to your GP who can refer you to an allergy specialist if needed.
- If you are prescribed adrenaline, always carry two devices with you.
- Always read ingredient lists thoroughly for personal care and household products.
- Check that all healthcare staff know about your allergy when having any medical procedures.
- If small packages don't have an ingredients label, speak to the pharmacist, ask shop staff for details, or check the manufacturer's website.
- You may also need to tell your employer about your allergy if you work in a setting that uses products containing chlorhexidine.
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Feedback

Please help us to improve our information resources by sending us your feedback at:

Sources

All the information we produce is evidence-based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you would like to know the sources we used in producing any of our information products, please contact info@anaphylaxis.org.uk and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

The content of this factsheet has been peer-reviewed by Dr Timothy Watts, Consultant Physician in Adult Allergy and Lead for Drug Allergy Service at Homerton Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to her review of this article.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this Factsheet is given in good faith. Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

About Anaphylaxis UK

Anaphylaxis UK is the only UK-wide charity solely focused on supporting people at risk of serious, life-threatening allergic reactions. We provide information and support to people living with allergies through our free national helpline. We also fundraise to achieve our ultimate aim, to create a safer environment for all people at risk of serious allergies. Visit our website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk and follow us to keep up-to-date with our latest news. We're on Facebook [@anaphylaxisUK](#), LinkedIn, Instagram [@anaphylaxisUK](#), and you can find our podcast [here](#).