

# Being aware of chlorhexidine allergy



Chlorhexidine is an antiseptic. Allergic reactions to chlorhexidine are rare but are becoming more common. Chlorhexidine is used in many products both in hospitals and in the community.

## Why have I been given this factsheet?

You have been given this brochure because you have had a reaction to a medication, a medical dressing or antiseptic. This may or may not be caused by a chlorhexidine allergy.

It is important that you are aware of the possibility of an allergy.

## Allergic reactions to chlorhexidine

Severe allergic reactions to chlorhexidine are rare, but they can be serious. Immediate allergic reactions can cause anaphylaxis (a very severe allergic reaction which can be life-threatening).

If you have an immediate allergic reaction to chlorhexidine you may experience symptoms such as:

- itching
- skin rash (hives)
- swelling
- anaphylaxis.

People who develop anaphylaxis to chlorhexidine may have experienced mild reactions, such as skin rash, to chlorhexidine before.

## Irritant contact dermatitis or allergic contact dermatitis

Chlorhexidine can also cause irritant dermatitis. This is not a true allergic reaction. It is caused by chlorhexidine directly irritating skin and results in rough, dry and scaly skin, sometimes with weeping sores.

Chlorhexidine can also cause allergic contact dermatitis. Symptoms look like irritant dermatitis, but the cause of the symptoms is delayed by 12-48 hours after contact with chlorhexidine.

Both irritant dermatitis and allergic contact dermatitis caused by chlorhexidine are annoying but not dangerous.

It is recommended that you avoid chlorhexidine if you experience these responses as some people have gone on to develop immediate allergic reaction to chlorhexidine.

## How do I know which products contain chlorhexidine?

It is not always easy to identify if a product contains chlorhexidine.

In the hospital setting, chlorhexidine is commonly used for hand washing and to clean the skin before performing a surgical procedure or inserting a needle. It can also be in dressings or medical devices.

Many over-the-counter (OTC) products also contain chlorhexidine.

There is no requirement for chlorhexidine to be listed on labels in a consistent manner. It may be listed as:

- clorhexidine
- CHG
- AGB.

If you have a clorhexidine allergy always talk to the pharmacist to check that what you are purchasing does not contain chlorhexidine.

**What should I do if I suspect I have a chlorhexidine allergy?**

Speak to your doctor who will take a history. This will often be followed by allergy testing to help confirm whether you do have an allergy.

**If you have a chlorhexidine allergy:**

1. Avoid products that contain chlorhexidine. Check labels and speak to your pharmacist.
2. Tell all health staff (doctors, nurses, dentists) well before you need to have a procedure about your allergy.
3. Wear a medical identification bracelet stating that you are allergic to chlorhexidine. This is important in case you are unconscious.
4. Discuss an emergency action plan with your doctor.

The table below lists some of the products that may contain chlorhexidine. Please note this list may not state every product that may contain chlorhexidine.

Products that may contain chlorhexidine	
<p><b>In hospital settings:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Skin antiseptic wipes</li><li>• Hand gels and hand wash solutions</li><li>• Surgical skin disinfectants</li><li>• Pre-surgery wash sponges and wipes</li><li>• Surface cleaning sprays and solutions</li><li>• Lubricant preparations</li><li>• Mouthwash</li><li>• Central venous lines</li><li>• Surgical dressings and mesh</li></ul>	<p><b>In community settings:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hand gels and washes</li><li>• Mouthwashes, toothpastes and other mouth products</li><li>• Disinfectants or antiseptics</li><li>• Shampoo, body wash, sponges and wipes</li><li>• Skin creams, ointments and cleansers</li><li>• Antiseptic throat lozenges and sprays</li><li>• Nasal sprays</li><li>• Cosmetics</li></ul>



This patient information brochure supports National Safety and Quality Health Service Standard 2 - Partnering with Consumers



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