Penicillin Allergy in a Pandemic on National Penicillin Allergy Day: A Call for Delabeling

The current pandemic has challenged our healthcare systems in ways never imagined and required all of us to go beyond the call of usual duty and make individual sacrifices for collective gain. As we reflect on each of our personal contributions, please consider another healthcare concern that intersects with all others: penicillin allergy. As hospitals fill with COVID-19 patients and the ensuing complications such as pneumonia, the topic of appropriate use of antibiotics and addressing unverified penicillin allergy labels has become even more pressing. The adverse effects of an unverified penicillin allergy include delays in treatment, higher healthcare utilization/cost, and risk of complicating infections. Penicillin allergy evaluation is an impactful way to decrease the burden of excess healthcare utilization on our health systems.

September 28th marks National Penicillin Allergy Day, the 93rd anniversary of the discovery of penicillin. Penicillin is instrumental in modern medicine in its ability to combat infections and remains the most efficacious and safe treatment for many life-threatening infections. However, penicillins are also the most frequently reported medication allergy. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 10% of patients self-report a penicillin allergy, but only <1% are actually found to be allergic when verified by testing.

To take action, Allergists and Infectious Disease physicians should partner to make penicillin allergy evaluations a mainstay of antibiotic stewardship. We need to increase community awareness of the negative consequences of unverified penicillin allergy labels and the utility of delabeling programs. Penicillin allergy evaluation requires no more than 1-2 visits to an allergist’s office and it is hoped in the future to have increasingly streamlined opportunities for delabeling. On this day, please reflect on how you as a medical provider, patient, and community member can help improve individual and public health through consideration of rationale antibiotic choices and penicillin allergy delabeling.

Sincerely,

Word Count: 300