

West Midlands Anaesthetic Allergy Clinic

Information and advice for patients

Immunology

Patients often have questions about testing for drugs that have or may have caused a reaction around the time of an anaesthetic. We hope this answers some the questions or concerns you have.

Why have I been asked to attend this clinic?

Patients come to this clinic because they have had a reaction of some sort, connected with an anaesthetic. This might have been a general anaesthetic when the patient is sent to sleep during an operation or a local anaesthetic when the patient stays awake and an injection is given to numb a particular area of the body. It is important to find out what triggered the reaction so it can be avoided in the future. The clinic also often tests for allergy to other drugs and substances that are used during an anaesthetic to make sure that a reaction will not occur when they are used.

Are all reactions that occur with anaesthetics due to allergy?

No, there are several types of reactions. Allergy occurs when the body encounters something that should be harmless but the Immune system triggers release of chemicals such as histamine. This causes swelling, rashes, a drop in blood pressure, difficulty breathing and, if the patient is awake, itching. Some of the drugs or techniques used in anaesthesia can also cause these things as a side effect rather than an allergic reaction. In the clinic, we try to establish which type of reaction might have happened.

Why is it not obvious which drug caused the reaction?

When a patient is sent to sleep, several different drugs are used. For example to make the patient sleep, to stop pain, to relax muscles, to stop the patient feeling sick and to prevent infections. These drugs are often given within minutes of each other so the person giving them cannot be sure which made the patient unwell.

I only had a local injection so why do I have to be tested?

Although very rare, local anaesthetics like those used by a dentist can still cause allergy, so we need to test to see if it was an allergy or a side effect.

My reaction happened when I was coming around. Isn't that too late for an allergy?

No, often drugs such as painkillers, antibiotics and drugs to stop the patient feeling sick are given at the end of an operation.

Do I need to prepare in any way for the appointment?

The patient can eat and drink normally. If they have a bad infection such as the 'flu, it is best to postpone the appointment. The testing cannot be done if the patient takes antihistamines (such as hay fever tablets) on the 3 days before the appointment. Other drugs such as some antidepressants and steroids can also interfere with the tests, so please ring us on the above number to discuss this before coming. The patient must not stop taking any regular medication without discussing it first.

What will happen in the clinic?

The patient will be seen by an Anaesthetist and an Immunologist. They will ask about what the patient and anybody else who was with them remembers. They will have the details of the reaction but it is always helpful to hear the patient's side of the story. The patient will be asked questions about other allergies that they might have and other medical conditions that might be important.

Once the team decide which drugs need testing, small drops are placed on the skin of the arm and each is gently scratched. This does not allow enough drug into the body to cause a bad reaction. This is called skin prick testing. Small itchy lumps will probably appear at at least one of the scratch sites but these are like small insect bites that disappear after approximately 10 minutes.

If the answer to what caused the reaction is not clear, then small amounts of very weak strengths of the drugs most likely to be the cause of the problem are injected into the skin (intradermal injection). This can sting for a few seconds. Again, we look for a small itchy lump appearing. If the answer to what caused the reaction is not clear by this stage we may need to arrange further appointment for additional skin tests or even repeat of previous skin tests as skin sensitivity can change and is influenced by a number of medications. Blood tests may also be needed.

How long do I need to stay in the clinic?

The appointment usually takes an hour. If additional testing (Intradermal injections) is required, this would require another hour. Rarely we may need to arrange a further appointment for repeat of skin tests or additional skin tests if the cause of the reaction is not clear at the first appointment. If blood tests are required, you may need to go to another area in the hospital for the blood to be taken (Phlebotomy or blood test room located in the Birmingham Treatment centre).

Will the testing make me unwell?

We have been holding this clinic for over 10 years and we have not seen any of the testing make patients feel generally unwell. This is because only a tiny amount of the drugs are used and not enough will get into the body to cause anything more than a reaction on the skin.

What happens afterwards?

The team will write to the doctor who referred the patient (usually the anaesthetist who was looking after the patient during the reaction), the patient and the patient's GP to tell them which drugs must be avoided and which are safe to use. You may be advised to buy a bracelet to wear that tells others what you are allergic to. Drug reactions should be reported to a National Scheme (MHRA Yellow Card Scheme) but this is done anonymously.

If you have any concerns or questions about your visit, please call the Immunology Department on the above number.

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