Antibiotic Stewardship: The Need for Penicillin Allergy Testing

Background

While about 10 percent of the population reports a history of penicillin allergy, studies show that approximately 90 percent or more of these patients are not allergic to penicillin and are able to take penicillin safely.

Penicillin allergy testing is safe, effective, and can be performed even in critically ill patients and pregnant women.

According to published research, an unverified history of penicillin allergy can contribute to higher health care costs, greater risk for adverse effects of alternative antibiotics, and increased rates of serious antibiotic resistant infections such as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA).

People who require penicillin or a penicillin-like drug but have a penicillin allergy that has been verified through skin testing can be offered penicillin desensitization if there is no equally effective alternative antibiotic.

Recommendations

Penicillin allergy testing and penicillin desensitization are important parts of a comprehensive antibiotic stewardship program, which should examine whether penicillin is appropriate for a patient before prescribing a more expensive or newer antibiotic. Federal policies to address the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance should:

Establish a national strategy working through the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other Federal agencies to encourage penicillin allergy testing to reduce the large number of patients mislabeled as allergic to penicillin;

Develop and adopt quality measures, Medicare Conditions of Participation (CoPs), and other federal health and safety standards that target a variety of settings to encourage correct identification of penicillin allergies; and

Implement the recommendations contained within the Report from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Workshop on Drug Allergy. http://www.jacionline.org/article/S0091-6749%2815%2900733-2/fulltext