

Why Do Antibiotics Make You Feel Worse?

A not-so-fun Part of Lyme Disease Treatment

By Annie Henry

If you are new to Lyme disease treatment—be it your run-of-the-mill pharmaceutical antibiotics or if you’ve opted for a more natural and alternative treatment plan—you may at some point wonder: *why the heck do I feel worse?* Treatment and medicine are supposed to make patients feel better, right? So why is your Lyme treatment making you feel worse?

It is not uncommon for Lyme disease patients to start feeling significantly worse a few days into taking antibiotics for the first time. It is easy to assume that the medicine isn’t working—that it is causing adverse effects or that maybe you are experiencing an allergic reaction to the medication. A logical response for both patients and doctors would be to stop with that treatment protocol and explore other options. However, I would argue that (contrary to surface-level logic) this would be a mistake.

If this fits your story, don’t be alarmed or discouraged when you react negatively to antibiotics. Most likely, what you are experiencing is not only normal for Lyme patients but is almost invited. You may be experiencing what is known as a Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction, or what we Lymies call a “herx”. Some day you may find yourself thinking of herxing as a good thing.

Let me explain...

What Is Herxing?

A herx is your body’s reaction to the die-off of Lyme (or co-infection) bacteria. When bacteria are killed off by antibiotics, they release toxins. Naturally, your body works to remove these toxins from your system. If bacteria are killed off at a faster rate than your body can handle, your system will be left with a backup of dead bacteria and toxins. This accumulation of toxins can cause a negative reaction, which often involves a worsening of symptoms. From headaches, to increased fatigue, to an influx of your usual Lyme symptoms—this die-off reaction can make patients feel miserable. Well, my friends, this unfortunate reaction is a herx.

In other words, herxing is a reaction to your body being ‘over-toxified’. This is why detox is such an important aspect of Lyme disease treatment.

Side note: the term “herxing” is named after dermatologists Adolf Jarisch and Karl Herxheimer. These two scientists discovered the herx reaction upon noticing negative reactions in their patients who were being treated with antibiotics for syphilis. Fascinating, huh? *(note the mild sarcasm)*.

What do they Feel Like?

I usually notice herxes a few hours after taking antibiotics or after the completion of my Lyme treatment. Sometimes they are mild and tolerable. Sometimes my herxes knock me down for days.

Just like normal Lyme disease symptoms, herxes range in frequency and severity. They can also manifest as different symptoms. From my experience, herxes cause similar symptoms as the active tick-borne infections in my body. I notice that some of my most persistent Lyme symptoms-including headaches, fatigue, joint and muscle pain, and dizziness-are also characteristic of my herxes. Except when I herx, often my symptoms feel significantly more severe. During the worst of my treatment, my herxes were intense. It is astonishing just how bad they can make you feel. Just when you get used to managing your Lyme symptoms-BAM! A herx hits you, reminding you how dreadful Lyme disease can be (as if you forgot, ha!).

Another way I would describe herxing is that it feels like I’m hungover. I feel especially achy and drained of energy. Headaches and brain fog-two symptoms of a bad hangover-often accompany my herxes...

Disclaimer: this article is for informational purposes only. It is not meant to help diagnose/treat or advise in Lyme disease treatment. Consult with a certified physician about herxing for qualified information.