

## Patient information

# Anaphylaxis

## What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction affecting the whole body, often within minutes of exposure to the allergen but sometimes after hours of increasing allergic symptoms. Food allergy is the commonest cause of anaphylaxis in children, whilst allergies to insect stings, medications and latex are other potential causes. Anaphylaxis can rarely be triggered when a person eats a problem food and exercises shortly afterwards, or by exercise alone, or can equally rarely occur with no obvious cause (called idiopathic anaphylaxis).

## What are the symptoms of an anaphylactic reaction?

Anaphylaxis can be difficult to recognise. It can present with many symptoms, but someone suffering an anaphylactic reaction would not necessarily experience all of them. Symptoms will vary from patient to patient and from reaction to reaction. Symptoms can deteriorate rapidly.

It is very likely to be anaphylaxis if your child has a sudden onset of skin symptoms (see below) with one or both of the following:

- Sudden airway or breathing symptoms
- Sudden symptoms involving the circulation

Symptoms can affect the:

- **Skin:** Generalised flushing or redness, itching, urticaria (nettle rash), angioedema (swelling usually of face and lips) and worsening of existing eczema.
- **Airway/breathing:** Itch in mouth and throat, itchy and runny nose and eyes (like hay fever; especially food allergy), choking, difficulty breathing, tightness or swelling in the throat, cough, breathlessness, tight chest, wheezing, asthma attack.

- **Gut:** Nausea, vomiting (even if food not swallowed), stomach ache, diarrhoea.
- **Circulation:** Dizziness, feeling faint and rarely fainting or collapse.
- Sensation of 'impending doom' or change in behaviour in younger children.

## How should we treat an anaphylactic reaction?

Use your adrenaline auto-injector (EpiPen or Jext) and call 999 early.

Anaphylaxis is best treated by avoiding it happening in the first place. Be open about your allergy problem with family, friends and colleagues. Prevent reactions by avoiding contact with the cause if known.

## Food allergy

- The dietitian will give advice about dietary avoidance.
- Supermarkets may provide lists of foods free from specific allergens.
- Look closely at ingredient lists; allergens are now listed in bold and large font.
- Be particularly careful in restaurants; always ask about the presence of allergens as restaurants now have a legal obligation to let you know.

## Drug allergy

- Always tell any medical person that you are allergic to a drug.
- Wear a medical alert (bracelet or chain).
- **Wasp and bee allergy:** Ask your doctor about the possibility of desensitisation.

## Remember

- The cause of an initial reaction **MUST** be confirmed with an allergy test
- Allergic reactions do **NOT** necessarily get worse with each reaction.
- If you travel abroad ask the allergy team for a letter to allow you to carry your EpiPen or Jext with you on the plane.
- Be prepared – carry your EpiPen or Jext!

*With thanks to the Children's Allergy Clinic, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, for permission to reproduce this information.*

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