

Allergy and anaphylaxis

OFFICIAL

What is an allergic reaction?

Allergic reactions happen when the immune system overreacts to something in the environment that is typically harmless to most people. They can be triggered by an allergen coming into contact with the skin, eyes, nose, lungs, stomach, or bowel. Examples of allergic reactions include hay fever, eczema, hives and drug or food allergies.

Symptoms of allergic reactions range from mild to severe. The most severe type of allergic reaction is anaphylaxis, which may cause death without prompt medical attention. In most cases, effective treatments are available to treat or manage allergy symptoms.

Symptoms of allergic reactions

A reaction will involve one or more of these symptoms.

Mild to moderate allergic reaction

- Hives or welts (a red, lumpy rash a bit like mosquito bites)
- A tingling feeling around the mouth
- Stomach (abdominal) pain, vomiting or diarrhoea
- Facial swelling
- Wheezing or coughing
- Runny nose, red itchy eyes

Severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis)

- Difficulty with breathing or noisy breathing
- Swelling of the tongue
- Swelling or tightness in the throat
- Difficulty talking or a hoarse voice
- Feeling faint or loss of consciousness
- Becoming pale and floppy (infants or young children)

Prevention

Preventing an allergic reaction is important. The best ways to prevent a future episode is to know and avoid the cause (trigger). If it was due to a drug, make sure to tell all clinicians who treat you about it and, if the reaction was severe, consider getting a MedicAlert bracelet so that in an emergency this important information will be immediately available.

Treatment

Treatment varies according to the symptoms and the severity of the reaction. Mild to moderate reactions may require treatment with antihistamines that help to reduce itch or rash. These medications can be purchased from your local pharmacy.

The first-line treatment for anaphylaxis is adrenaline (epinephrine). Adrenaline counteracts the effects of anaphylaxis by reducing throat swelling, opening the airways, and maintaining heart function and blood pressure.

Your doctor may prescribe an adrenaline autoinjector (EpiPen® or Anapen®) after an episode of anaphylaxis. The adrenaline autoinjector should always be with you (even when you are admitted to hospital) so it can be used immediately to treat a future reaction. It contains one dose of adrenaline and is designed to be injected into the outer mid-thigh muscle by yourself or carer. Your doctor or healthcare professional will show you how to use it.

Sometimes a short course of corticosteroid, such as prednisolone, is prescribed.

For more information about anaphylaxis and how to administer an adrenaline autoinjector, see the ASCIA website (www.allergy.org.au/anaphylaxis).

Home care

- Avoid the allergen or trigger
- Use any medications as prescribed by your doctor
- If symptoms recur or worsen, seek medical attention

Follow-up

A patient treated for anaphylaxis remains under clinical observation for at least four hours after their last dose of adrenaline, or overnight as appropriate.

Most cases can be followed up by your local doctor. Sometimes you will be referred to an allergy specialist to consider ongoing medications or other treatments.

You should receive an action plan for anaphylaxis or allergic reactions from your doctor (see also www.allergy.org.au).

What to expect

Most allergic reactions settle down quickly with appropriate treatment. They may recur if you are exposed again to the trigger. It is important to know and avoid the cause, if possible.

If you have had a severe reaction (anaphylaxis) you may need a period of observation in hospital.

Seeking help

If you are experiencing severe symptoms, especially difficulty breathing, faintness or swelling of your tongue or throat, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance and administer an EpiPen if you have one.

Mild to moderate attacks can be treated by your local doctor.

For health advice from a registered nurse, you can call NURSE-ON-CALL for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria, 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Visit the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA) website at www.allergy.org.au

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