

Anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis is a serious allergic reaction that comes on rapidly. It can impair breathing or cause a rapid drop in blood pressure that can result in death if appropriate intervention is not provided.

Itching, swelling of the lips or face, and hives are common symptoms, but don't necessarily always appear during a reaction. Several body systems can be involved in an anaphylactic reaction.

Although many substances have the potential to cause anaphylaxis, the most common triggers are foods and insect stings. Food allergens account for the majority of reactions. 90% of those reactions are caused by just 8 foods: Peanuts, Tree Nuts, Shellfish, Fish, Milk, Soy, Eggs and Wheat. Of non-food allergens, insect stings are most common. In some cases of anaphylaxis, the cause remains unknown.

A food allergy is an overreaction of the immune system in response to a food protein. This fact is what distinguishes a food allergy from a condition such as lactose intolerance, whose symptoms are limited to the GI system. A food allergy triggers an immune system response and may affect multiple systems of the body. Even a miniscule amount of food can cause this overreaction and lead to anaphylaxis. Checking the complete list of ingredients and inquiring into the potential for cross contamination are key. There is no cure for food allergies. Strict avoidance of the food is the only way to prevent a potentially life-threatening reaction.

An allergic reaction usually occurs within seconds or minutes after exposure, but can occur up to 2 to 4 hours later. The severity and progression of an allergic reaction are unpredictable. An individual may have a mild reaction one day and a very severe reaction the next. A seemingly mild reaction can turn dangerous within minutes.

The most dangerous symptoms of an anaphylactic reaction are breathing difficulties and a rapid drop in blood pressure, both of which may lead to death if untreated.

Prompt administration of epinephrine is critical. Always call 911. A second dose of epinephrine may be necessary if the reaction is not subsiding.

Signs of Allergic Reaction

Mouth: Itching, tingling, or swelling of lips, tongue or mouth

Skin: Hives, itchy rash, swelling of face or extremities

Gut: Nausea, abdominal cramps, vomiting, diarrhea

Throat: Tightening of throat, hoarseness, hacking cough

Lungs: Shortness of breath, repetitive coughing, wheezing

Heart: Weak pulse, low blood pressure, fainting, paleness, cyanosis (blueness)