

Severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) in children

Children's Allergy Service

Information for Patients

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What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis (pronounced “ana-fil-ax-is”) is a severe allergic reaction. It can happen quickly within minutes after a child eats something they are allergic to. Rarely, it can happen 2 to 3 hours later.

It can be life-threatening and always needs an emergency response right away.

Allergic reactions happen when the body thinks something that is harmless is bad. The allergen (what you are allergic to) can make the skin red and itchy with a rash and swollen. It can cause tummy pain and feeling sick (nausea or vomiting).

Anaphylaxis is when the allergic reaction affects the whole body. It causes problems with breathing and other parts of the body.

Most allergic reactions are not anaphylaxis. Very severe, life-threatening allergic reactions are very rare but are also unpredictable. **This is why all anaphylaxis must be taken seriously and needs treatment right away. You must see a health care professional if this happens.**

What causes anaphylaxis?

Food is the most common cause of anaphylaxis in children. In the UK, foods that cause the most serious allergic reactions are:

- cow's milk
- peanut
- tree nuts
- fish/seafood
- sesame

Sometimes medicines, latex (type of rubber) and insect stings (bee, wasp) can cause anaphylaxis too.

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Children with food allergies **do not** have anaphylaxis by touching the food. Touching an allergen can cause a skin rash. If the allergen gets on to some food and the child eats it, this can trigger a serious allergic reaction.

What are the signs of anaphylaxis?

You can have 1 or more symptom:

Airway:

- Cough that will not stop
- Voice changes (hoarse voice)
- Hard to swallow
- Swollen tongue

Breathing:

- Hard to breathe or noisy breathing
- Wheezing (like an asthma attack)

Consciousness:

- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Skin feels cool and sweaty (clammy)
- Confusion
- Not waking up or responding. This is because the blood pressure has become low.

Less serious symptoms:

- Itchy and bumpy rash (called hives)
- Feeling or being sick
- Swelling of the lips or face
- Tummy pain

In children, the most common symptoms of anaphylaxis cause problems with the airway and breathing. The throat can tighten, causing problems with swallowing and a high-pitched noise (stridor) when breathing in.

How is anaphylaxis treated?

Anaphylaxis is treated with adrenaline (also called epinephrine). This is an injection given to the side of the leg into the thigh. It works fast to help with breathing, swelling, and blood pressure.

You can use a special type of 'pen' called adrenaline auto-injector (AAI). This can be an EpiPen® or Jext®.

It is better to give adrenaline than to wait if you are unsure.

Other allergy medicines such as antihistamines will not help anaphylaxis. They will help milder symptoms such as itchy rash, swelling, and tummy pain.

Giving adrenaline can be lifesaving, and should be given at the first signs of anaphylaxis.

- **Always call 999 and ask for an ambulance** whenever anaphylaxis happens. This is even if there has been a good response to an adrenaline injection.
- If you have been prescribed an **AAI**, then **please carry it around at all times**.
- When you have reaction, **you should sit up or lie down with your feet up** (whichever is more comfortable).
- Standing up and moving about could make the reaction worse.



What is a biphasic reaction?

If you have an anaphylactic reaction, you will need to go to hospital. You will stay in hospital until after you have recovered. This is because you could get another reaction. This is called biphasic anaphylaxis. Most biphasic reactions happen within hours of the first reaction. But it can be more delayed. This does not happen very often in children.

Contact details

Children's Allergy Service: **0116 258 6694**

More information

- www.sparepensinschools.uk
- www.allergyuk.org
- www.anaphylaxis.org.uk
- www.jext.co.uk
- www.epipen.co.uk

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