

Allergy and anaphylaxis

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.

Alan, Ada and Eva Selwyn Emergency Department
24 hours, 7 days a week
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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®) 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 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 return to Cabrini ED or your closest emergency department – call an ambulance if the symptoms are severe

Follow-up

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

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

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.

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- 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