

Allergies



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0845 300 1818

Allergies are commonplace, and appear to be slowly on the increase. There are a wide range of allergies to substances and a wide range of reactions ranging from minor problems to life-threatening conditions. Many of these start early in life, and an understanding about this common problem can help calm fears and concerns that many Leaders, parents/guardians and carers can have.

What is an allergy?

An allergy is caused by the body's reaction to a substance that it recognises as "foreign". This foreign substance is called an allergen (antigen), or allergenic substance, and the type and extent of the allergic response mounted by the body depends on many factors such as the degree of previous exposure to the allergen, the severity of previous reactions and the amount of allergen exposed to the body at any one time.

Common allergens include:

- Food such as nuts, eggs, milk, fish and shellfish;
- Medications such as antibiotics (penicillin);
- Environmental allergens such as pollen, house dust and animals. Although not an allergen, chemical fumes can exacerbate asthma
- Insect bites such as from bees, wasps and hornets;
- Other compounds including rubber (latex).

The body responds to an allergenic exposure by releasing chemicals, particularly histamine, which cause inflammation of the body tissues. The amount of histamine, and where in the body it is released, accounts for the different types and degrees of allergic reactions encountered.

Allergic reactions

The effects of exposure to allergens can be very varied. Typical reactions include:

- Skin itching or flushing
- Skin wheals (Urticaria, commonly called "hives" or "nettle rash")
- Swelling of the face and tongue
- Itching/watering nose or eyes
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Coughing
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Collapse and loss of consciousness
- Nausea/feeling sick and vomiting
- Stomach cramps
- Diarrhoea

Degrees of allergic reactions

Not all allergies result in someone having all of the above reactions. For example, an asthma sufferer may notice an increase in their wheeziness during the hay fever season from exposure to pollens, and someone with eczema may develop worsening skin rash

and itching from a change in their usual environment, e.g. bedding, detergent. However, even these longstanding allergic responses may get dramatically worse with exposure to a high level of allergen.

A sudden exposure to a high level of allergen, or exposure of even small levels of allergen in a very sensitive person, can trigger a massive allergic response resulting in many of the above reactions occurring together. This can be life threatening, and is termed anaphylaxis.

Anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis can kill very rapidly.

In such individuals the histamine release from exposure to an allergen is massive and wreaks havoc in the body, creating a severe state of inflammation showing itself in many of the reactions listed above. Prompt treatment is vital in stopping the reaction and reversing the problems arising from it. If not, death can occur.

Some people know if they suffer from anaphylaxis, but an anaphylactic reaction can be triggered in someone who has previously never had such a reaction.

Known anaphylaxis sufferers often wear Medic-Alert type bracelets or medallions to warn others of their susceptibility, and their likelihood of having a severe allergic reaction.

Adrenaline, also known as epinephrine, is a medicine that can halt the worsening of symptoms during a severe allergic reaction, and many anaphylaxis sufferers also carry auto-injectors of adrenaline in case of an emergency. Auto-injectors are special pen-like injection devices that are designed to inject a fixed dose of adrenaline into the thigh muscle. These are commonly referred to as the EpiPen® or AnaPen®.

Practical Advice for Leaders

- Be aware of any allergy sufferers within your Group or Section. Find out what the

triggering allergens are, what the usual allergic reaction is like, and what that person normally does when a reaction is triggered. An informal chat with the parent or guardian engenders trust and confidence for all concerned.

- Make all Leaders in the Group or activity aware of the possibility of a severe allergic reaction in one of its members.
- If any member has a severe allergy or anaphylaxis, avoid any games or activities that bring that person into contact with the triggering allergen.
- In severe allergy to food components, such as nuts, always check the labelling carefully before giving a sufferer food. Remember that even small traces of food allergen can trigger anaphylaxis. When preparing food, it is essential to prevent cross contamination of allergenic foods with non-allergenic foods. Even safer, consider banning the allergenic food at camps, meetings, etc.
- Familiarise yourself with any medications taken by the sufferer, and agree with them and their parent/guardian when any medication should be taken in the event of an allergic reaction. Make sure all Leaders know where the medications are stored.
- With an anaphylaxis sufferer, strongly consider being trained on how to use the adrenaline auto-injector, as it can be life saving. A trained doctor, nurse or knowledgeable parent can help with this. Alternatively, contact your ADC (Special Needs) or ACC/AAC/Adviser (Special Needs) who will be able to arrange for you to speak to someone.
- The Scout Association will support any Leader who has to administer medication to a Member who is having an allergic reaction if they administer the sufferer's usual medication in the normal prescribed dose.
Adrenaline auto-injectors must not be

used by anyone who is not trained in their use

- Remember it is considered good practice for the Leader to obtain written permission from the parent or guardian for administering any medication to a young person.
- Don't forget that Leaders and other adults can suffer allergies, and the reactions they cause. This may be especially relevant when individuals are in situations such as Nights Away or in unfamiliar environments.

Factsheet written in partnership with



Further Information

Allergy UK,

No 3 White Oak Square

London Road,

Swanley,

Kent

BR8 7AG

Telephone: 01322 619898

Helpline: 01322 619864

Fax: 01322 663 480

Email: info@allergyuk.org

Website: www.allergyuk.org

Action Against Allergy

PO Box 278,

Twickenham

TW1 4QQ

Telephone: 020 8892 2711

Email:

AAA@actionagainstallergy.freemove.co.uk

Website: www.actionagainstallergy.co.uk

The Anaphylaxis Campaign

PO Box 275

Farnborough

GU14 6SX

Telephone: 01252 373793

Helpline: 01252 542029

Fax: 01252 377140

Email: info@anaphylaxis.org.uk

Website: www.anaphylaxis.org.uk