

Anaphylaxis is a severe and potentially life-threatening allergic reaction. Symptoms can start within seconds or minutes of exposure to the food or substance you are allergic to and usually will progress rapidly.

What are the causes of anaphylaxis?

The common causes of anaphylaxis include foods such as peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, shellfish, fish, sesame seeds and kiwi fruit, although many other foods have been known to trigger anaphylaxis. Very small amounts can cause a reaction.

Why does anaphylaxis occur?

Any allergic reaction occurs because the body's immune system reacts inappropriately in response to the presence of a food or substance that it wrongly perceives to be a threat. When this happens, chemicals including histamine are released. These can cause swelling in the skin, lips, mouth, throat or lower airway causing difficulty in swallowing and/or breathing.

What are the symptoms of anaphylaxis?

You may notice any of these severe symptoms:

- Swollen tongue
- Hoarse voice
- Difficulty swallowing
- Difficult or noisy breathing, wheeze, persistent cough
- Rapid drop in blood pressure

In addition to those severe symptoms listed above, there may also be:

- Widespread flushing of the skin
- Nettle rash (otherwise known as hives or urticaria)
- Swelling of the skin (known as angioedema) anywhere on the body
- Swelling of the lips
- Abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting

What is the treatment for a severe reaction?

Pre-loaded auto-injectors (sometimes referred to as 'pens') containing adrenaline are prescribed for people believed to be at risk of a severe reaction. The treatment for a severe allergic reaction is an injection of this adrenaline into the muscle in the upper outer area of the mid-thigh. Because severe allergic reactions can occur rapidly, the prescribed adrenaline auto-injector must be readily available at all times. The injection must be given as soon as a severe reaction is suspected to be occurring and an ambulance must be called immediately.