

# ALLERGIC REACTIONS

An **allergy** is a person's abnormal response to something that is usually harmless. That material is called an **allergen**. Some examples of common allergens are pollen, dust mites, animal dander, molds, latex, insect bite, medications and certain foods. The most common allergies affect the nose (runny and sneezing), eyes (watery and itchy), breathing (wheezing and coughing), or the skin (itchy with hives or a rash). Some common terms for these kinds of allergies are "hay fever," "pet allergies," "dust allergies," "allergic asthma," and "hives."

A severe and possible life-threatening allergic reaction is called **anaphylaxis** or **anaphylactic reaction**. This is the most dangerous type of allergic reaction. **If not treated immediately it can lead to death.** Many people who are at risk for this reaction carry an epinephrine-filled syringe with them at all times. **It is called an Epi-pen.** You may need to be trained in how to use one of these devices if you work with someone who has a history of these reactions.

## What does an anaphylactic reaction look like?

The most common signs of an anaphylactic reaction are:

- Hives (itchy bumps on the skin)
- Swelling of the throat, lips, tongue, or around the eyes
- Difficulty breathing or swallowing

## Some other common signs are:

- A metallic taste or itching in the mouth
- Flushing, itching or redness of the skin
- Abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Heart racing
- Paleness
- Lightheadedness
- A sudden feeling of weakness
- Anxiety or an overwhelming sense of doom
- Collapse
- Loss of consciousness

## What should you do if you see an allergic reaction?

Call 911 if the person appears:

- To have difficulty breathing
- Complains that their throat is closing up
- To be wheezing severely
- To be unconscious
- To have severe swelling of the face, tongue or eyes or at the site of an insect bite
- Complains of dizziness
- Gray or blue in color

Other situations:

- Consult your nurse or health care provider
- Write down what you see and what you think may be the cause
- Share what you see and think with other staff
- Share what you think and see with the HCP or nurse



# ALLERGIC REACTIONS (CONT.)

## *How can you prevent an allergic reaction?*

Usually, avoiding what the person is allergic to can be the simplest way to control their allergy. Depending on what he or she is allergic to, this plan may or may not work well. If the person is allergic to dust mites, pollen, mold or pet dander, you can reduce their exposure by making a few changes in the home and lifestyle.

For example, if he or she is allergic to **dust mites or mold**:

- Don't allow the humidity level in the home to go above 50 percent.
- Use an air conditioner in the summer.
- Cover the mattress, box spring, and pillows with plastic or allergen-proof covers.
- Remove rugs.
- Do not use upholstered furniture.
- Use washable curtains and draperies.

If he or she is allergic to **pollen**:

- Stay indoors when the pollen counts are high.
- Keep the windows in your home and car closed.
- Use air conditioning.

If he or she is allergic to **pet dander or cigarette smoke**:

- Keep pets outside.
- Allow no smoking in the home.
- Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke.

If the person has a food allergy, avoiding the food is the only way to control that allergy. **Food, medication, and insect allergies are the most common causes of anaphylaxis.**

## *What about medications?*

Sometimes avoiding the substance that you are allergic to is not possible. There are many different types of medications that can help lessen the symptoms. Some are available over the counter, and others require a prescription. The person's health care provider should be consulted about what medication might be best.

