



ALLERGIES

HEALTH CARE LEAFLET

Introduction

An allergy is an adverse reaction that the body has to a particular food or substance in the environment.

Some of the most common allergens include:

- Grass and tree pollen (hay fever)
- Dust mites
- Animal dander (tiny flakes of skin or hair)
- Food allergy (particularly fruits, shellfish and nuts)

Allergy, Sensitivity or Intolerance?

- **Allergy** – this is a reaction produced by the body's immune system when it encounters a normally harmless substance
- **Sensitivity** – this is the exaggeration of a normal side effect produced by contact with a substance. For example, the caffeine in a cup of coffee may cause extreme symptoms, such as palpitations and trembling, when it would usually only have this effect when taken in much larger doses.
- **Intolerance** – this is where a substance (such as lactose) causes unpleasant symptoms (such as diarrhoea) for a variety of reasons, but does not involve the immune system. People with an intolerance to certain foods can typically eat a small amount without having any problems. In contrast, people with a food allergy will have a bad reaction even if they come into contact with a tiny amount of the food to which they are allergic.

Symptoms of Allergies

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can vary, depending on the allergen.

If the person is allergic to substances in the air – such as pollen, animal dander and dust mites – the symptoms usually include:

- **Rhinitis** – sneezing and a blocked, itchy or runny nose
- **Conjunctivitis** – itchy, red, streaming eyes
- **Asthma** – wheezing, breathlessness and a cough

If the person is allergic to a certain food or medication, symptoms can include:

- **Hives (Urticaria)** – a raised, itchy rash
- **Swelling** – usually affecting the lips, tongue, eyes and face
- **Abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhoea**
- **Atopic eczema** – the skin becomes dry, red and cracked.

You can also be allergic to substances coming into direct contact with the skin, such as perfumes, soaps, hair dyes and metal jewellery. This causes a type of eczema known as 'contact dermatitis' (the skin becomes red, blistered, dry, scaly and cracked).

Treating Allergies

The best treatment for an allergy depends on which allergen is causing the reaction. If medication is used it is primarily to control the symptoms of the allergy. Types of medication commonly used include:

- Antihistamines
- Decongestants
- Leukotriene receptor antagonists
- Steroid sprays

As these are used to treat symptoms it is always best to discuss which is the best to use with a pharmacist or doctor.

Anaphylaxis

Most allergic reactions occur in a particular part of the body, such as the nose, eyes or skin. In anaphylaxis, the allergic reaction involves the whole body and usually happens within minutes of coming into contact with a particular allergen. It can be fatal.

The symptoms of anaphylactic shock can include any or all of the following:

- Swelling of the throat and mouth
- Difficulty swallowing or speaking
- Difficulty breathing
- A rash anywhere on the body
- Flushing and itching of the skin
- Stomach cramps, nausea and vomiting
- A sudden feeling of weakness, due to a fall in blood pressure
- Collapsing and becoming unconscious

If you suspect somebody is experiencing anaphylaxis call 999 immediately for an ambulance. If you can see a potential trigger, such as a wasp or bee sting embedded in their skin, remove it.

If available an adrenaline injection (EpiPen, Jext or Emerade auto-injectors) should be given as soon as a serious reaction is suspected. This can be done by the person with anaphylaxis. Before attempting the injection, make sure you know the correct way to use the injector.

The injector should be placed firmly into the muscle of the outer thigh. Make sure you do not accidentally inject into a fatty part of their leg, as adrenaline cannot move through fat. Also do not inject into a vein or artery, as this can cause dangerous side effects.

After injecting, the syringe should be held in place for 5-10 seconds.

Injections can be given through clothing.

Most people should experience a rapid improvement in symptoms once the adrenaline has been used. If there is no improvement after five minutes, you should inject a second dose of adrenaline, if one is available. This should be injected into the opposite leg.