

The Emotional Impact of Life-Threatening Allergies

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Imagine how frightening it would be to know that eating certain foods, or getting stung by a bee, could make your skin break out in hives, your heart race and your throat become so tight you can't breathe. These are just some of the symptoms that someone at risk for a life-threatening allergic reaction may worry about daily. Whether this is you or someone you care about — your child, your classmate, or your student — having potentially life-threatening allergies may cause feelings of anxiety, resentment or even helplessness. However, being informed and prepared about how to help yourself or someone you know avoid allergic triggers and, if necessary, treat a life-threatening allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) may alleviate some of the stress and provide a level of confidence.

Parents

Being the parent of a child with potentially life-threatening allergies can produce a variety of emotions from concern and anxiety to apprehension about your child growing more independent. But you can gain a feeling of control by ensuring that teachers, the school nurse, your child's friends and school administrators are aware of your child's potentially life-threatening allergies and comfortable in their role of helping him or her manage that risk.

Also, even a young child should have the information and tools to avoid potential allergens and should know what to do in case of accidental exposure. As your child grows more independent with age and needs less of your hands-on support throughout the day, you both can replace some of the anxiety with pride that he or she is ready to handle the risk. It's important to instill confidence in your child so they can become their own best advocate down the road.

Students

Having potentially life-threatening allergies might make you feel different than your friends and classmates. You might be embarrassed about your risk of having an anaphylactic reaction at home, school or a friend's house. Know that you are not the only one affected by life-threatening allergies. In fact - a 2011 study found that 8% of children in the U.S. — approximately 1 out of 13 — suffer from a food allergy! Of those children affected, more than 38% had a history of a severe reaction, and 30% had allergies to multiple foods. But, a life-threatening allergy doesn't mean you can't participate in activities at school or with your friends and family. In fact, it gives you the chance to take on the role of teacher and educate others. It may be tough at first, but everyone will be more comfortable after you:

- ★ Share the facts about your potentially life-threatening allergy and your risk of anaphylaxis with friends and teachers.
- ★ Explain that anaphylaxis is a life-threatening allergic reaction that happens when you come into contact with something to which you are allergic.
- ★ Let them know how important it is and how they can help you avoid becoming exposed to an allergic trigger.
- ★ Tell them how to get help, administer treatment and seek immediate medical care in the event of a life-threatening allergic reaction.

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Teachers

Learning that one of your students has a potentially life-threatening allergy probably creates some concerns and questions, like, “How will this affect my classroom environment?” and “What will I have to do differently?” Teachers strive to create a classroom environment conducive to learning for every student and this includes awareness of and preparedness for a life-threatening allergic reaction. Whatever emotions might surface as you learn of a student’s allergy, it is important that you remain calm and take proactive actions to:

- ★ Minimize risk of exposure to allergic triggers,
- ★ Know the signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis,
- ★ Be ready to respond if an anaphylactic reaction occurs.

A vital part of being prepared is to give all your students an overview of potentially life-threatening allergies and the risk of anaphylaxis at the beginning of the school year. Points to cover include:

- ★ Being respectful and considerate of students with potentially life-threatening allergies,
- ★ Explaining the symptoms,
- ★ Helping others understand the importance of avoiding allergens,
- ★ Assigning classroom roles for taking immediate action in case of an anaphylactic reaction.

The bullying of children at risk for life-threatening allergic reactions takes on greater urgency because of the serious nature of the condition. Teachers play an active role in preventing bullying in and out of the classroom, so it is important to ensure that you are enforcing a strong, proactive anti-bullying prevention program that includes a system whereby all students learn how to recognize and report bullying related to potentially life-threatening allergies. As always, continue to be on the lookout for signs that children in your classroom might be experiencing bullying or teasing because of his or her allergy.