

Classroom Tips for Managing Life-Threatening Allergic Reactions

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ANAPHYLAXIS

Do your homework

Before the school year officially begins, check with the school nurse or your school administration to find out which students in your class are at risk for anaphylaxis, a life-threatening allergic reaction.

Arrange a meeting with the student and his/her parents — and the school nurse if there is one at your school — to learn more about the student's potentially life-threatening (severe) allergies and how you can help manage the student's severe allergies in the classroom environment. Questions to ask may include:

- ★ **Allergens:** Which allergens are known to be triggers for the student, and how can we help avoid exposure in the classroom?
- ★ **Symptoms:** What symptoms might the student typically experience that indicate a life-threatening allergic reaction is starting or in progress? Remember the signs can be subtle at first but can progress rapidly. In up to 90% of life-threatening allergic reactions, a person can have hives (medical name: urticaria), itching (medical name: pruritus), flushing and itching and/or swelling of the lips, tongue or uvula/palate.
- ★ **Treatment:** Will there be epinephrine for the student available in the nurse's office? Will the student always have epinephrine with him/her in the classroom? Can he/she administer it? Your school nurse or designee should be able to provide you with step-by-step instructions on how to administer epinephrine, if needed.

Develop an action plan that details the steps that all of you — the student, teacher, nurse and other students in the classroom, as necessary — will take immediately if there is exposure to a known trigger and/or anaphylactic symptoms begin. Give each person a copy, and keep it in the classroom for easy access.

Ask the student if he/she is comfortable sharing — or allowing you to share — information about the risk of a life-threatening allergic reaction with the other students in advance of the school year. This will enable the student's classmates to help avoid allergen exposure in the class and learn how to best support the student in managing his/her anaphylaxis risk.

Give the class a lesson in “Anaphylaxis 101”

In advance of the school year, give your students an overview of severe allergies and the risk of anaphylaxis. Points to cover can include:

- ★ **Support avoidance:** If students at risk for anaphylaxis are willing to share, ask them to explain what their allergens are; then you can explain how to help them avoid exposure in and out of the classroom.
- ★ **Understand the symptoms:** Explain the potential symptoms and how they can cause serious illness or even, in rare instances, death. They can start mild but get worse fast. They can include skin rash/hives, itching, flushing, fainting and itching and/or swelling of the lips, tongue or palate.
- ★ **Immediate treatment is critical:** Assign roles, in advance, to students who can take immediate action in case of a life-threatening allergic reaction in the classroom. For example, while you are attending to the affected student and potentially administering epinephrine, one student can be using the class phone to call the nurse's office, while another can run to the nurse and/or principal's office; another student can alert a teacher in the next classroom to seek immediate medical care. Write the steps and assigned roles on a poster board and post it prominently in the classroom near the door and other places around the room.
- ★ **Have empathy:** Share that while anaphylaxis can happen to anyone with severe allergies, some people already know they are at risk due to certain allergens. Explain that people are born with or develop severe allergies, it can happen to anyone, and it is important to have respect and consideration for the student.

The Get Schooled in Anaphylaxis initiative offers practical information to educate the school community to help those at risk for life-threatening allergic reactions avoid their triggers, recognize anaphylaxis signs and symptoms and understand how to quickly get appropriate treatment and immediate medical care when anaphylaxis occurs.

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For younger students

- ★ The student with severe allergies might like to have a show-and-tell about his/her “special jewelry” – i.e., a medical identification bracelet or necklace – for the class.
- ★ Play the “wash up” game – have everyone wash their hands with soap and water – at the beginning of the school day and again after lunch and snacks. Explain that hand sanitizers don't get rid of the allergens, so hand-washing is a must.
- ★ Discourage students from swapping or sharing their food with one another to avoid accidental exposure to an allergen.
- ★ For children who are learning or know how to read, incorporate allergen avoidance as an activity in the school day by teaching them how to read and understand food labels, and understand what triggers to look for. Have them search for certain words, such as “peanuts” or “milk.”

For older students

- ★ Although older adolescents are at higher risk of having a life-threatening allergic reaction compared to children of any other age, it's also the age when many students feel compelled to fit in and not stand out from peers.
- ★ Even if the student does not want to be identified as at risk for a life-threatening allergic reaction to his/her classmates, give a lesson to the whole class about having tolerance for everyone's differences, and use allergen avoidance and management as an example.
- ★ Encourage the student to share his/her risk of a severe allergy with another adult he/she spends time with or admires at school, such as an athletic coach or music or drama teacher. They may provide additional support and reinforce the need for the student to be ready to respond with medicine for an anaphylactic reaction.

For all students

- ★ Bullying happens at all grade levels, and children perceived as different in any way may be targeted. Bullying of students with severe allergies should not be tolerated and should be handled with the same steps taken for bullying for other reasons.

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