

Hospital Authority Health Guide

Allergy

(1) What is Allergy?

- An allergic reaction is a hypersensitivity reaction initiated by the immune system to allergens encountered. The reaction varies across individuals and may range from mild, serious to life-threatening.
- Any substance may possibly be an allergen which enters the body via the gastrointestinal tract, respiratory tract or skin.
- Common allergens include:
 - food (such as peanut, nuts, sesame, fish, shellfish, milk products, egg and strawberry)
 - preservatives and dyes, natural emulsifiers
 - drugs
 - substances for external use (such as cosmetics, herbal medicine)
 - inhaled substances (such as pollen, dust)
 - insect bites and stings
 - unknown allergens

(2) Common Symptoms

- An allergic reaction may cause local or generalized symptoms which are usually mild and temporary. However, serious symptoms can be fatal.
- Allergic reactions may vary in severity. Common allergic reactions include:
 - local skin rash (mild reaction)
 - generalized skin rash
 - gastrointestinal discomfort, e.g. diarrhea
 - irritated, red and itchy eyes
 - swelling of face, lips, tongue and other mucous membranes, itchy mouth
 - for insect bites or stings, skin surrounding the bites and stings areas may be swollen
 - narrowing of the airways, resulting in breathing difficulties
 - low blood pressure or shock
- the above reactions can occur separately or at the same time.

(3) Anaphylactic Shock

- This is the most serious reaction which affects body systems such as the circulatory system, respiratory system and may be life-threatening.
- Symptoms include generalized rash, difficulty in breathing, low blood pressure and shock.

(4) Angioneurotic Edema/ Angioedema

- It is a serious allergic reaction which causes local edema in body tissues.
- Symptoms include swelling of face, lips, tongue and other mucous membranes; and rash on the skin. If the respiratory tract is affected, suffocation and death may result.

(5) Treatment and Care of Allergic Reaction

- Prevention is the most effective method. Identify and avoid possible allergens and notify the healthcare professional at once.
- When allergic reactions occur, you should:
 - stay away from the allergens at once;
 - attend a nearby clinic quickly; if the allergic reactions are serious, please go to an Accident & Emergency department for medical attention at once.
- After treatment at the Accident & Emergency department, observe the following:
 - avoid contact with the allergens, and take medication as prescribed;
 - symptoms may take hours to subside. Some patients may require admission to hospital for observation. If the condition worsens, return to Accident & Emergency department for medical attention at once;
 - record and avoid contact with possible allergens, and inform the healthcare staff each time attending medical consultation.