

Classroom Tips for Managing Life-Threatening Allergic Reactions (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 life-threatening allergic reactions.

Arrange a meeting with the student and his or her parents — and the school nurse if there is one at your school — to learn more about the student's potentially life-threatening allergies and how you can maintain a safe classroom environment.

Questions to cover may include:

Allergens: Which allergens are known to be potentially life-threatening 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 they can progress rapidly. In 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 an epinephrine auto-injector for the student available in the nurse's office? Will the student have an epinephrine auto-injector with him/her in the classroom at all times? 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 an epinephrine auto-injector, 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 can 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.



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Give the class a lesson in “Anaphylaxis 101”

In advance of the school year, give your students an overview of potentially life-threatening 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 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, a 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.

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Have empathy: Share that while anaphylaxis can happen to anyone with potentially life-threatening allergies, some people already know they are at risk due to certain allergens. Explain that people are born with or develop potentially life-threatening allergies, it can happen to anyone, and it is important to have respect and consideration for the student.

For younger students

The student with potentially life-threatening allergies might like to have a show-and-tell about their “special jewelry” — 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.



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For older students

Older adolescents are at the age when many 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 or 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 or her risk of a potentially life-threatening 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 at all times 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 potentially life-threatening allergies should not be tolerated, and should be handled with the same steps taken for bullying for other reasons.

For more information about severe allergies in school, visit EpiPen.ca.



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