

## Preventing Allergic Reactions

The purpose of this Health and Safety Alert is to provide guidance on the signs of an allergic reaction and how to respond in the event that an individual has an allergic reaction.

An **allergy** is an individual’s abnormal response to something that is usually harmless, which is referred to as an **allergen**. The most common allergens affect the nose (running and sneezing), eyes (watery and itchy), breathing (wheezing and coughing), and/or the skin (itchy with hives or a rash). Some common terms for these kinds of allergies are “hay fever,” “pet allergies,” “dust allergies,” “allergic asthma,” and “hives.”.

A severe, and possibly life-threatening, allergic reaction is called **anaphylaxis** or **anaphylactic reaction**. This is the most dangerous type of allergic reaction. If not treated immediately, this can lead to death. Individuals who are at risk for this reaction will have a physician’s order for an epinephrine-filled syringe, which may be referred as an EpiPen, Auv-Q or another name. If an agency provides services to an individual who requires this medication, staff need to be familiar with what this medicine is called and trained on its use.

<b><i>What does an Anaphylactic Reaction Look Like?</i></b>	<b><i>Other Common Signs of Anaphylaxis include:</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hives (itchy bumps on the skin)</li> <li>• Swelling of the throat, lips, tongue or around the eyes</li> <li>• Difficulty breathing or swallowing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Metallic taste or itching in the mouth</li> <li>• Flushing, itching or redness of the skin</li> <li>• Abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea</li> <li>• Heart racing</li> <li>• Paleness of the skin</li> <li>• Lightheadedness</li> <li>• A sudden feeling of weakness</li> <li>• Feeling of anxiety</li> <li>• Loss of consciousness</li> </ul>

Increasing awareness of allergies is the key to obtaining a diagnosis and optimal treatment. Research suggests that individuals with developmental disabilities may be highly susceptible to developing reactions to various allergens. Complicating this is the fact that there are many individuals who often cannot verbalize the health complications and/or symptoms they are experiencing or feeling. It is important to recognize a change in an individual’s behavior, as behaviors may start or increase when the individual is experiencing allergy symptoms. Therefore, education is an important component of preventing and controlling allergies.

<b><i>Examples of Allergens:</i></b>	<b><i>Signs or Symptoms of an Allergy May Include:</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Latex</i></li> <li>• <i>Drug</i></li> <li>• <i>Environmental</i></li> <li>• <i>Pets</i></li> <li>• <i>Bee Stings</i></li> <li>• <i>Pollen</i></li> <li>• <i>Mold</i></li> <li>• <i>Insects</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty breathing</li> <li>• Itchy nose, ears, throat or itchy, watery eyes</li> <li>• Sneezing</li> <li>• Headache</li> <li>• Mouth sores</li> <li>• Complaints that his/her throat feels like it is closing up</li> </ul>

<b><i>Examples of Allergens:</i></b>	<b><i>Signs or Symptoms of an Allergy May Include:</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Foods</i></li> <li>• <i>Peanuts &amp; other nuts</i></li> <li>• <i>Strawberries</i></li> </ul> <p><i>**Note that there may be allergens not on this list that an individual may have a reaction to.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wheezing</li> <li>• Severe swelling of the face, tongue or eyes</li> <li>• Complaints of dizziness</li> <li>• Gray or blue in color</li> <li>• Localized skin rash or itching (especially on the hands for a latex allergy)</li> <li>• Decreased level of consciousness or confusion</li> </ul>

### ***Allergy Prevention***

Controlling allergies and preventing allergic reactions depends on the type of allergies. Some tips for managing allergies include:

- Avoiding or reducing contact with known allergens.
- Taking allergy medication.
- Keeping an EpiPen on hand and accessible at all times to all staff who have been trained if supporting an individual at risk for anaphylaxis. (Remember, *any* staff member can be taught how to administer an EpiPen.)
- Ensuring that an EpiPen is brought on outings for those individuals at risk.
- Encouraging individuals who have severe allergic reactions to wear a medical alert bracelet or necklace.

It is also important to note that an individual who has never had allergy symptoms can develop them at any time, to anything. While the vast majority of people develop allergies as children, there has been a rise in the number of adults who are developing allergies or cross-sensitivities.

A cross-sensitivity is a sensitivity to one “substance” that predisposes an individual to sensitivity to other substances. Be aware of anything new that has been introduced to an individual (i.e., foods, medications, lotions, etc.). If staff recognize the symptoms of a new allergic reaction in any individual, staff need to notify the RN immediately.

### ***Plan of Nursing Services (PONS)***

For an individual who has been diagnosed with, and is being treated for, allergies of any type, information about the allergies should be incorporated into the individual’s person-centered plan(s) and assessments, as appropriate. The RN should develop and implement a PONS and review this with staff. Allergies may present differently in each individual, so the PONS should advise staff on what to look for and what to do in the event of an allergic reaction.

### ***It is crucial to be able to recognize when an allergic reaction is happening!!***

- If an allergic reaction to a new medication or any other allergen is suspected that threatens an individual’s health or well-being, the RN must be notified immediately. Depending on the severity of the threat, staff may need to notify 911 first and then notify the RN.
- Any follow-up with an RN or physician should be documented in an individual’s medical record in accordance with agency policy.