

Severe Allergic Reactions (Anaphylaxis) to Medicines

This information sheet will help you understand more about severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) to medicines and what you can do if you experience one. It is not a substitute for talking with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is a severe, potentially life-threatening, allergic reaction. It usually causes a number of symptoms such as:

- difficult or noisy breathing
- swelling of the tongue
- swelling or tightness in the throat
- difficulty talking and/or hoarse voice
- wheezing or persistent coughing
- persistent dizziness or collapse.

Young children can become pale and floppy.

Symptoms usually occur within 30 minutes of exposure to what is causing the reaction, but can occur up to several hours later. Anaphylaxis, if untreated, can cause death within minutes.

What causes anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis can be caused by many things. For example, medicines, medical devices containing medicines, insect bites and stings, and food (such as peanuts).

The most commonly reported medicines that cause anaphylaxis are antibiotics, muscle relaxants used in surgery and NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), but can occur with most medicines.

Reports of anaphylaxis to medicines (and any other reactions to medicines and vaccines) can be made to the Centre for Adverse Reactions Monitoring (CARM) at www.otago.ac.nz/carm. Table 1 below shows examples of medicines that have caused anaphylaxis and have been reported to CARM.

Table 1: Examples of medicines that have caused anaphylaxis

Class of medicine	Examples of medicines
Antibiotics	Amoxicillin, cefaclor, cefazolin, clavulanic acid, flucloxacillin, penicillin
Muscle relaxants and anaesthetics used in surgery	Rocuronium, suxamethonium
Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs	Diclofenac, ibuprofen, naproxen
Antiseptics and disinfectants	Chlorhexidine
Vaccines	Any (this is why you are asked to wait for 20 minutes after having a vaccination)

Who can have a severe allergic reaction?

A severe allergic reaction can happen to anyone. If you have suffered an allergic reaction in the past, any future reaction can be severe.

What should I do if I think I am having a severe allergic reaction?

Call 111

Seek medical attention immediately by dialling 111 and saying you are having a severe allergic reaction (or get someone else to do it for you).

What treatment is given for a severe allergic reaction?

Adrenaline (epinephrine) is the main treatment that is given. You will probably be taken to hospital.

Before you leave hospital, you should be:

- referred to an allergy/immunology service for complete evaluation (allergy testing is useful to work out the medicine responsible for your allergic reaction)
- provided with an Anaphylaxis Management Plan
- prescribed adrenaline to carry with you in case you have another reaction and shown how to use it.

You could also get a Medic Alert bracelet. You can find out more information about these at www.medicalert.co.nz

Where can I find out more information?

You can find more information about anaphylaxis on the Allergy New Zealand website at www.allergy.org.nz/A-Z+Allergies/Anaphylaxis.html

If you have any further questions, please discuss these with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.