Allergies and Severe Allergic Reactions

Food allergies occur in up to 8% of children and up to 2% of adults.

A true food allergy is when an individual’s immune system overreacts to an ordinarily harmless food. The symptoms may occur even with a small exposure to the food.

**Food Intolerance**: This is NOT a food allergy. It does not cause an immune response. It is an adverse reaction to a specific food or ingredient. An individual may have uncomfortable abdominal symptoms after consumption of the food since they may lack the enzymes necessary to break down the food for proper digestion. A child with lactose intolerance has a food intolerance.

**Food Allergy**: The most common foodstuffs that cause an allergic reaction are the proteins in cow’s milk, eggs, peanuts, soy nuts, fish, wheat, tree nuts. Some symptoms are seen immediately and some are seen several hours after ingestion of the food protein. Most of these can still cause a reaction even after they are cooked. Peanut allergies have become more common in the past 10 years.

**Symptoms of allergic reactions to food**
The most common type of food allergy can result in gastrointestinal symptoms of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or abdominal cramps or a severe local reaction on the lips. This may include itching of the lips and tongue, followed by edema. Eczema, a skin condition characterized by itchy, scaly, red skin, can be triggered by a food allergy. Symptoms of asthma, a chronic disease characterized by narrowed airways and difficulty in breathing may be triggered by food allergy.

**Severe allergic reaction**
Food allergies can also result in anaphylaxis and death. In severe cases, consuming a food to which one is allergic can cause a life threatening reaction called anaphylaxis- a systemic allergic reaction that can be severe and sometimes cause death. Symptoms of wheezing and excessive nasal and bronchial secretions may occur. They may have difficulty breathing and cyanosis with the possibility of complete airway occlusion. Individuals may complain of “itching all over” and feeling flushed. Their blood pressure can drop and their pulse increase, as well as lose consciousness as they go into anaphylactic shock. This is a medical emergency and treatment is needed immediately.

**Other causes of allergies or anaphylaxis**
Substances other than food can cause allergies or anaphylaxis. These substances can include **inhalants** such as pollen, mold spores, and animal dander; **injectable substances** such as insects and bee stings and medications; **ingestants** such as foods and medications; and **contactants** such as plants, cosmetics, chemicals, metals, latex, and animal dander.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis are reversed by treatment with injectable epinephrine, antihistamines, and other emergency measures. It is essential that anyone with symptoms of possible anaphylaxis get emergency treatment immediately.

Please contact your school nurse with questions or concerns.

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