Severe Allergic Reaction Treatment

Self-Care at Home

Do not attempt to treat severe reactions or to "wait it out" at home. Go immediately to the nearest emergency department or call an ambulance. While waiting for the ambulance, try to stay calm.

- If you can identify the cause of the reaction, prevent further exposure.
- Take an antihistamine (one to two tablets or capsules of diphenhydramine [Benadryl]) if you can swallow without difficulty.
- If you are wheezing or having difficulty breathing, use an inhaled bronchodilator such as albuterol (Proventil) or epinephrine (Primatene Mist) if one is available. These inhaled medications dilate the airway.
- If you are feeling light-headed or faint, lie down and raise your legs higher than your head to help blood flow to your brain.
- If you have been given an epinephrine kit, inject yourself as you have been instructed or have someone else perform the injection. The kit provides a premeasured dose of epinephrine, a prescription drug that rapidly reverses the most serious symptoms of anaphylaxis.
- Bystanders should administer CPR to a person who becomes unconscious and stops breathing or does not have a pulse.

If at all possible, you or your companions should be prepared to tell medical personnel what medications you take and your allergy history.

Medical Treatment

The first priority in the emergency department is to protect the airway (breathing) and maintain adequate blood pressure. The emergency team will make sure that your airway is open and that you are getting adequate oxygen.

- Oxygen may be given through tubes into the nose or by face mask.
- In severe respiratory distress, mechanical ventilation may be required. In this situation, a tube is placed via the mouth into the air passages to keep
the airway open. The tube is connected to a ventilator (providing oxygen directly into the lung).

- In rare cases, a simple surgery is performed to open an airway.

If blood pressure is dangerously low, medication to increase blood pressure will be given.

- An intravenous (IV) catheter may be inserted
- This is used to give saline solution to help boost blood pressure.
- The IV line may also be used to give medication.

You may need to be admitted to the hospital for further monitoring and treatment.


WebMD Medical Reference from eMedicineHealth
Reviewed by Melissa Conrad Stöppler, MD on May 16, 2007
Last updated: May 16, 2007
This information is not intended to replace the advice of a doctor.
© 2006 WebMD Inc. All rights reserved.