

Anaphylaxis: the key messages for GPs

The number of people who suffer severe systemic allergic reactions is increasing. Peanut allergy affects around one in 70 children, and a growing number of people experience severe reactions to tree nuts (e.g. almonds, Brazils, walnuts), sesame seeds, milk, egg, fish, fresh fruit, latex and insect stings.

Symptoms

may include some or all of the following:

- Pruritus
- Angio-oedema, especially of the face or larynx, leading to dyspnoea, dysphonia and dysphagia.
- Severe asthma
- Urticaria
- Abdominal cramps and nausea
- Collapse and unconsciousness.

Severity is unpredictable. A mild reaction may be followed by a more severe one at a later date. Symptoms may progress rapidly. The patient can develop severe dyspnoea or hypotension in 10-15 minutes from the onset. Severity may be affected by the dose.

Assessing the Risk

In 1994 the Chief Medical Officer said: "All patients suspected to suffer from peanut allergy should be referred to a specialist clinic. Even if the diagnosis is in doubt, patients should on no account be advised to test their reaction by eating peanuts." A referral is important for anyone whose symptoms suggest anaphylaxis, whatever the cause. The specialist should undertake a full assessment and may offer skin prick tests and blood tests.

Treatments

Adrenaline (epinephrine) is the front line treatment for a severe reaction. Because this must be administered without delay, patients are prescribed their own injection kits for use in an emergency.

Most doctors now prescribe adrenaline auto-injectors: easy-to-use device with spring-

activated needles. The **EpiPen** is distributed by ALK Abelló, 2 Tealgate, Hungerford, Berks RG17 0YT. Tel 01488 686016. The **Anapen** is distributed by Lincoln Medical, 13 Boathouse Meadow Business Park, Cherry Orchard Lane, Salisbury SP2 7LD. Tel: 01722 410443. Both companies sell "trainer" pens for teaching purposes.

These devices inject the drug intra-muscularly. For most patients, I.M. adrenaline is perfectly safe. However, the doctor should consider all co-existing medical conditions (e.g. heart problems). Beta blockers and ACE inhibitors may hinder treatment.

Inhaled adrenaline can be effective for mild or moderate symptoms involving the mouth, throat or respiratory system, but there is no adrenaline inhaler licensed for use in the UK.

Further Information

The Anaphylaxis Campaign has a wide range of information sheets and training videos. Contact details are below.

Locating an Allergy Clinic

For a list of NHS allergy clinics, visit the website of the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology: www.bsaci.org

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