

## After Anaphylaxis: Learning From the Experience

Having experienced your own allergic reaction or witnessing someone else having an allergic reaction, especially a severe one (anaphylaxis), can be extremely upsetting and scary. Nevertheless, it can be an opportunity to learn and feel more confident. Embrace the experience and learn from it.

In order for it to not let it get you down, here are things to think about:

### Are you sure of the trigger that caused the allergic reaction? Confirm with your doctor!

- Review if it is an obvious exposure to a known allergen trigger or if it is a mystery. You would not want to be avoiding a food that is *not the real trigger* nor want to miss an unexpected food allergen that is a *true* trigger.
- If it is not clear what triggered the reaction, it is especially important to review with your doctor. Keep ingredient labels, consider storing any leftover food, and ask for all possible ingredients or known allergens used around the food that caused the problem. Do not assume it was a cross contact. Consider where it happened, what your child was doing at the time, and any circumstances that are different than usual.

### Did you respond to the symptoms with appropriate treatment? Always more to learn!

- This is a great learning opportunity to review with your doctor how you recognized and treated the allergic reaction. What did you do right? What could you have done better?

### After-care of anaphylaxis includes addressing the emotional toll!

- You may be sad, nervous, and distrustful for a while. This is completely normal. This feeling should pass with time. Normal routines should return in a few weeks.
- It is normal for people to feel guilty, worried, anxious or unsure about “what is safe”.
  - Accidents happen; it is a learning experience and an opportunity to do better.

*See the next page on “Handling the Emotional Impact of Anaphylaxis” for more details.*

### Stay Positive

- Focus on all of the success in daily life, not just on food allergy or this reaction.
- The reaction was a setback, but you managed and learned! Reward positive behaviors (carrying/using medications, “no thank you” to unsafe foods, asking good questions, etc.).

### What to do if things are not the same after having anaphylaxis

- Experiencing anaphylaxis can sometimes result in longer-term increased anxiety, or lead to post-traumatic stress. It may cause a feeling of “not knowing what is safe anymore”. This can result in avoidance of food or situations that everyone knows is safe but cause too much anxiety. *If life is not back to normal in a few weeks, it may become necessary to address negative behaviors and feelings.* You may need help. That is normal and it is OK!
- In the companion sheet, we provide some more information about what to expect after anaphylaxis and how to address the emotional impact pro-actively.
- Help is available. Talk to your doctor about referral to a mental health professional. Very effective approaches are available and can make life-changing improvements.
- Some examples of what you can do:
  - Learn coaching techniques to help your child face safe but anxiety-provoking situations.
  - Learn whether the experience is “expected and normal” after an anaphylactic reaction or should be addressed with more assistance to get back on track.
  - Learn relaxation techniques.
  - Learn about the benefits of counseling, cognitive behavioral treatment or medications. These approaches are only recommended if they are essential to help get through an episode of increased stress.

## Handling the Emotional Impact of Anaphylaxis – Tips & Suggestions

Anaphylactic reactions can be stressful. This handout reviews general points that both parents and patients may wish to consider in the immediate and long-term management of the emotional impact. These are general suggestions and may not be applicable to all individuals. Please talk to your physician about individualized care from a mental health expert if needed.

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF A REACTION EVOLVES OVER TIME – WHAT ONE DOES AND FEELS DURING OR IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE EVENT IS NOT THE SAME AS WHAT HAPPENS LATER ON.

### WHAT TO DO DURING ANAPHYLAXIS OR SUSPECTED ANAPHYLAXIS?

- Follow your Doctor’s orders regarding the administration of epinephrine, anti-histamines and further emergency care, if needed.
- Parent: try to project calm while doing so, if possible. However, if you are not calm and cannot project it, do not get too upset about it. The task now is to handle the event itself.

### WHAT TO DO IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE EVENT IS UNDER CONTROL?

- OK to admit that you are or were afraid, if that is the case.
- Parent: try to point out that the event was handled well, if that were the case.
- Parent: ask the child how he or she feels - but do not persist. It is ok if the child does not want to talk.
  - If the child discloses distress, say that this is normal and that indeed, the event was distressing. Validate the emotion and emphasize safety. Physical contact (e.g. a hug) may be appropriate.

### WHAT TO DO LATER ON (WEEKS / MONTHS)?

- If indicated, there may be a need to re-evaluate “safety” (what is and is not safe to eat) given the event.
  - This is best done with the help of an allergist.
- Ask your child how they feel.
  - Try to send the message that your child can talk with you about feeling distressed, that it is normal to feel some stress even after the event has passed, and that it is a good idea to speak with you about it.
- Initially, there may be increased anxiety in general, or in situations that were previously thought of as safe.
  - This is normal. This anxiety is expected to get better over the course of a few months (not necessarily immediately).
  - If it does not subside, or if it gets worse after a month, intervention / assistance may be needed.
- Adjustment after the event may include addressing the feeling that the world is less safe.
  - The event may lead to a re-evaluation of safety; the task is to arrive at a new understanding of safety.
  - Sometimes, this process gets derailed and the child’s feelings that she or he are not safe turn into persistent distress, an anxiety disorder, a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other reactions. Those are best managed with the help of a mental health professional.
- Relaxation techniques, cognitive-behavioral therapy, supportive therapy, and psychiatric medications are all options that would work for specific types of symptoms in specific instances.
  - The preference should be for short-term, targeted interventions, unless a chronic mental health condition is diagnosed in addition to a specific response to an event.

### THE SILVER LINING

Overcoming a period of distress may increase resilience and help the patient face other future challenges!