

# CHILDHOOD ALLERGIES

## Guidance for Parents

In the UK, 40% of children have been diagnosed with an allergy, and almost 1 in 12 young children suffer from a food allergy.

With these figures in mind, it's important for parents to be able to recognise the signs of an allergic reaction and know how to respond if their child experiences one.

## What is an allergic reaction?

An allergy is **the response of the body's immune system** to a normally harmless substance. These substances, known as **allergens**, are mistakenly identified by the immune system as a threat.

The most common causes for allergies are:

- **Food allergens**, such as peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, sesame, wheat, fish, or shellfish
- **Insect stings**, particularly from bees or wasps during outdoor activities
- **Pollen**, especially during spring and summer months
- **Animal dander**, sometimes present on clothing
- **Medications**, including antibiotics
- **Latex**, sometimes found in gloves or sports equipment

For many children, allergy symptoms are mild, but in some cases, **reactions can intensify within minutes**, become severe and **potentially life-threatening**, a condition called **anaphylaxis (or anaphylactic shock)** that requires immediate medical attention.

## Good to know:

- Most children with allergies won't show a reaction the first time they come into contact with an allergen, because their immune system has not yet been sensitised.
- Allergies can appear at any age. Symptoms and tolerance can change over time.
- While some childhood allergies, especially to cow's milk, hen's egg, wheat, and soya can be outgrown, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, and sesame are more likely to continue into adulthood.

## Common symptoms of a mild allergic reaction

- Itchy skin or a raised rash (hives)
- Swelling around the lips, eyes, or face
- Sneezing or a runny nose
- Watery or itchy eyes
- Tingling in the mouth
- Mild stomach discomfort, nausea, or vomiting
- Complaints that their throat feels “scratchy”

Younger children may struggle to describe what they are feeling and may instead appear distressed, agitated, itchy, or uncomfortable.



## Symptoms of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis)

- Sudden swelling of the lips, mouth, throat or tongue
- A rash that is swollen, raised or itchy (hives)
- Coughing, wheezing, very fast breathing or struggling to breathe – they may feel like they are choking or gasp for air
- Tightening throat and struggling to swallow
- Blue, grey or pale skin, tongue or lips – for black or brown skin, this may be easier to see on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet
- Skin that feels cold to the touch
- Confusion, tiredness, drowsiness or dizziness
- Fainting, losing consciousness
- Becoming limp, floppy or unresponsive – their head may fall to the side, backwards or forwards, or they may find it difficult to lift their head or focus on your face

## When to call emergency services

If you suspect your child is having a severe allergic reaction, **call 999 immediately**.

Use an adrenaline auto-injector if one is available. Help your child lie down and raise their legs. If they are struggling to breathe, help them sit up slowly or raise their shoulders to ease breathing. If they have been stung by an insect, carefully remove the sting if it is still in the skin.

Use a second adrenaline auto-injector if symptoms do not improve after 5 minutes.

