

# Understanding allergies and anaphylaxis

Knowing about allergies enables you to recognise the signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction.

## Definitions

**Allergens** – allergic triggers, which include airborne allergens (such as dust and pollen), food allergens, insect venom, medication, and rubber products

**Allergy** – occurs when the immune system reacts to an **allergen** in the environment. A reaction often occurs within minutes or up to a few hours after contact. It can range from mild, to severe, to life-threatening.

**Anaphylaxis** – the most severe form of allergic reaction, often affecting several parts of the body, including the respiratory system and/or the cardiovascular system. It can be caused by exposure to allergens such as food, insects, latex, or medication. Anaphylaxis is potentially life-threatening.

Anaphylaxis is always a medical emergency. An ambulance must be called and the child must see a doctor, even when an EpiPen has been used.

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Source:  
Ministry of Education

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## Allergens

Common causes of allergic reactions in New Zealand:

- **Airborne triggers** – dust mites, pollen, mould spores, allergens from cats and other furry or hairy animals, such as dogs, horses, rabbits, and guinea pigs
- **Food allergens** – any type of food can trigger an allergic reaction. The most common food allergens are milk (dairy), eggs, peanuts, tree-nuts, seeds such as sesame seeds, soy, wheat, shellfish, and fish.
- **Insect venom** – bee and wasp stings
- **Other triggers** – medications, latex in rubber products.

Source: [Allergy New Zealand](#)

## Food allergy and food intolerance

A **food allergy** is an abnormal immune system response to the introduction of a food, an ordinarily harmless substance, into the body. In some people a food allergy is life threatening.

A **food intolerance** does not involve the immune system. It does not cause severe allergic reactions (known as anaphylaxis). Reactions can be immediate or delayed for up to 20 hours after a food is eaten. These reactions are not the same as allergies, but may include:

- rashes and swelling of the skin
  - asthma and a stuffy or runny nose
  - irritable bowel symptoms, such as colic, bloating, and diarrhoea
  - migraines, headaches, lethargy, and irritability.
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