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Helpsheet

Food Allergy Basics

- A food allergy is an immune system response to a food protein that the body mistakenly believes is harmful. When the individual eats food containing that protein, the immune system releases massive amounts of chemicals, triggering symptoms that can affect a person's gastrointestinal tract, skin, breathing and/or heart.
- Symptoms of food allergy can include; hives, swelling of the lips, face and eyes, vomiting abdominal pain, swelling of the tongue, breathing difficulty, persistent dizziness or a sudden collapse. If left untreated, these symptoms can be fatal.
- It is estimated that up to 2% of adults, 1 in 10 babies* and 6% of children have food allergy and some of them will experience a life-threatening allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).
- There are more than 170 foods known to have triggered severe allergic reactions. Examples include kiwi fruit, banana, chicken, mustard and celery.
- Currently, there is no cure for food allergy. Avoidance of the food is the only way to prevent a reaction.
- Adrenaline/epinephrine is the first line treatment for severe allergic reactions and can be administered via an auto-injector called the EpiPen®.
- Food allergy is the leading cause of (severe reactions) anaphylaxis outside the hospital setting.
- An estimated 10 people die from anaphylactic reactions each year in Australia and some of these are triggered by food. We do not know exact numbers because there is no register collecting data.

* Osborne et al. Prevalence of challenge-proven IgE-mediated food allergy using population-based sampling and predetermined challenge criteria in infants. *J Allergy Clin Immunol* 2011; 127: 668-676

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