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How Can We Make Our School Safe from a Life-Threatening Allergic Condition?

By Anne H. Sheetz, RN, MPH, Massachusetts

Students with life-threatening allergic conditions such as allergies to bee stings, peanuts, tree nuts, milk, and shellfish present major challenges to schools. These challenges include both preventing exposure to the offending antigen and providing an emergency response within minutes should an exposure occur. Each school needs a comprehensive procedure, which is supported by its administration, that addresses the care of the child with a life-threatening allergy.

Responding to these issues requires a team approach. First, parents should be encouraged to meet with the school nurse before the child's entry into school. For many parents, this is a worrisome time as the child moves from the more "controlled" environment of the home into a school where the potential for inadvertent exposure may increase. A detailed individualized health care plan, completed in collaboration with the parent and including an emergency care plan, is essential. The school nurse should call a team meeting, which may include staff like the school principal or administrator, teachers, athletic staff, food service personnel, bus drivers, and others who come into direct contact with the child. The team—and the entire school staff—may need updated information on the prevalence of life-threatening allergies, the stringent precautions necessary to avoid exposure to the allergen, and the emergency response.

Prevention is key to a successful program. If the child is allergic to a specific food, parents of his/her classmates may be requested not to send the given food into the classroom. Teachers need instructions about cleaning surfaces that may inadvertently be exposed to the antigen. Food

service personnel will need to understand that many prepared foods have hidden ingredients; this makes careful label reading essential. (Parents can be extremely helpful in educating school staff about prevention strategies.)

However, to assume that a *completely* allergen-free school setting (e.g., peanut free) can be achieved is false security. Therefore, a detailed emergency response plan is essential. Although the laws vary among states, many do permit unlicensed personnel to administer epinephrine by auto-injector (Epi-Pen) to students experiencing a life-threatening allergic event. Thus the school nurse will need to work with the parents to ensure (a) availability of an auto-injector(s), (b) training and review of its use with school personnel, (c) coordination with local emergency medical services, and (d) follow-up whenever an Epi-Pen is administered in the school. Because of the relatively high rate of biphasic reactions, all children who experience a life-threatening allergic event and receive Epi-Pen should be transported to the local emergency medical facility by trained emergency personnel. State laws and local emergency medical service (EMS) protocols concerning which emergency medical personnel are authorized to administer epinephrine by auto-injector (Epi-Pen) vary. It is also important for school personnel to be knowledgeable about the EMS services in their community. Not all ambulances carry epinephrine by auto-injector (Epi-Pen).

A further challenge is the child who experiences his first life-threatening allergic reaction in the school setting. Of the 47 children who received Epi-Pen in the Massachusetts schools between September 1, 2003, and December 31, 2003, 23% had not been previously diagnosed as having a

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life-threatening allergy. School nurses need to prepare for this event and obtain the appropriate emergency orders should this occur.

Beginning in 2001, the Massachusetts Department of Education convened a task force to develop guidelines for managing children with life-threatening allergies in schools. The task force members included representatives from the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America New England Chapter, the Massachusetts School Nurse Organization, the Massachusetts Department of Public

Health School Health Unit, the Massachusetts School Food Service Association, the Executive Committee of the Massachusetts School Physicians, the Allergy and Immunization Division of Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, emergency medical services, and Framingham State College. The resultant guidelines, *Managing Life-Threatening Food Allergies in Schools*, were published in the fall of 2002 and are available to schools throughout the nation by accessing the web site,

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/2002/news/allergy.pdf>.

March 2004— Addendum

State School Nurse Consultant's Q & A: School-related questions about HIPAA. *NASN Newsletter*, 19(2), 15–18. Author: McComb, M., & Scott, J. (2004).

Some answers contained in the article are specific to Texas state law. State laws affect how HIPAA applies to schools, public health, and immunizations. For state-specific interpretation, consult your legal advisors, state school nurse consultant, or state attorney general's office.

Also, a clarification on the question, "Are employee records protected by HIPAA?": The answer is yes if the district self-insures its employees and is therefore a health care plan.



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