

# ANAPHYLAXIS

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November 7, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *ANAPHYLAXIS*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=66244>

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**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Medicine, Immunology, Emergency Medicine

## 1. Core Definition and Pathophysiology

Anaphylaxis is defined as a severe, life-threatening, systemic hypersensitivity reaction that is rapid in onset and involves a wide range of physiological systems. It represents the most extreme manifestation of an immediate allergic response, typically mediated by immunoglobulin E (IgE). The initial exposure to a specific foreign substance, known as an **allergen**, primes the immune system, leading to the creation of IgE antibodies specific to that allergen. These IgE molecules attach themselves to the surface of immune cells, primarily mast cells and basophils, which are abundant in tissues such as the skin, lungs, and gastrointestinal tract.

Upon subsequent re-exposure, the allergen acts as a bridging agent, cross-linking the IgE receptors on the surface of these sensitized mast cells. This critical event triggers a rapid and widespread cellular activation process called degranulation. Degranulation results in the swift release of potent preformed and newly synthesized inflammatory mediators into the circulation. Key mediators include **histamine**, leukotrienes, prostaglandins, and platelet-activating factor (PAF). These substances are responsible for the severe clinical symptoms characteristic of anaphylaxis, initiating profound changes in vascular permeability and smooth muscle contraction throughout the body.

The release of mediators causes two primary catastrophic physiological effects: widespread vasodilation and increased capillary permeability. Vasodilation leads to a sharp drop in **systemic vascular resistance**, while increased permeability causes fluid to leak rapidly from the bloodstream into surrounding tissues, resulting in edema and a critical reduction in effective circulating blood volume. Together, these phenomena lead to distributive shock, often referred to as **anaphylactic shock**, which can quickly impair vital organ perfusion. Simultaneously, mediators targeting the respiratory system cause bronchodilation, laryngeal edema, and excess mucus production, leading to severe respiratory distress and obstruction.

## 2. Etymology and Historical Recognition

The term **Anaphylaxis** derives from the Greek roots *ana-* (meaning "against" or "backwards") and *phylaxis* (meaning "protection"). The term was deliberately coined in 1902 by the French physiologists Charles Richet and Paul Portier to describe the opposite effect of "prophylaxis" (protection). Their seminal work involved studying the effects of sea anemone toxin injections in dogs. Instead of finding increased immunity after a small initial dose, they observed that a second, subsequent injection resulted in a catastrophic, rapid, and fatal reaction, demonstrating a

paradoxical hypersensitivity rather than immunity. For this groundbreaking discovery defining hypersensitivity, Richet was awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1913.

Prior to Richet and Portier, historical accounts of rapid death following exposures to certain foods or insect venoms existed, but the underlying mechanism was unknown and often attributed to direct poisoning or idiosyncratic reactions. The work defining anaphylaxis established the fundamental principle that the immune system, designed for protection, could sometimes mount a response so vigorous that it became lethal to the host. This shifted scientific understanding from viewing immediate adverse reactions as isolated toxic events toward recognizing them as a complex, antigen-driven immunopathological process.

Early research focused heavily on identifying the mediators responsible for the circulatory collapse and respiratory failure. Subsequent decades saw the identification of histamine as a key player and the development of antihistamines, although these were quickly recognized as insufficient for treating severe anaphylaxis. The realization that anaphylaxis was a distinct, IgE-mediated disease laid the groundwork for modern immunology and the development of specific treatments targeting both the symptomatology and, eventually, the underlying allergic state.

### 3. Clinical Manifestations and Severity Grading

Anaphylactic reactions typically involve two or more organ systems, though severe reactions can sometimes present primarily with cardiovascular or respiratory collapse. Symptoms usually manifest within minutes (sometimes seconds) of exposure, underscoring the necessity for rapid recognition and intervention. The most common presentation involves cutaneous symptoms, such as generalized **urticaria** (hives), pruritus (itching), flushing, and angioedema (swelling, often of the lips, tongue, or throat). While these symptoms are highly indicative of an allergic reaction, their absence does not rule out anaphylaxis, especially if cardiovascular or respiratory distress is present.

Respiratory symptoms are often the most life-threatening component, encompassing dyspnea (shortness of breath), wheezing due to bronchospasm, and stridor resulting from critical laryngeal edema. Compromise of the airway is a paramount concern, as swelling can rapidly lead to total airway obstruction. Gastrointestinal symptoms, including severe abdominal cramping, vomiting, and diarrhea, often accompany systemic reactions. Neurological involvement, though less common as a primary symptom, can range from generalized anxiety and a sense of impending doom to seizures or loss of consciousness due to profound hypotension and resultant cerebral hypoperfusion.

Severity is often graded clinically to guide immediate treatment. A mild reaction might be confined to localized hives, while a severe reaction involves rapid progression to cardiovascular and/or respiratory compromise. The most serious outcome is **anaphylactic shock**, defined by refractory

hypotension despite aggressive fluid resuscitation, leading to shock, coma, or death, as illustrated by the severe outcomes described in the source content. The speed of onset is inversely related to the prognosis; the faster the reaction develops, the more severe the outcome is likely to be.

Furthermore, anaphylaxis can present in two distinct patterns: uniphasic, where symptoms resolve fully after treatment; and biphasic, where symptoms recur hours after initial resolution, even without further exposure to the allergen. The potential for a biphasic reaction necessitates prolonged observation of patients who have experienced a systemic reaction, typically 4 to 12 hours, depending on the severity of the initial episode and the half-life of the triggering agent. Failure to monitor for this rebound effect can be critical.

#### 4. Common Triggers and Risk Factors

Anaphylaxis can be triggered by virtually any substance capable of initiating an IgE-mediated response, though common categories account for the vast majority of cases. The most frequent triggers vary by age and geographical location. In children, **food allergens** are overwhelmingly the leading cause, particularly peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, wheat, soy, and fish/shellfish. Adult triggers are more diverse, often involving medications and insect venoms.

Drug-induced anaphylaxis is a significant clinical challenge, with beta-lactam antibiotics (like penicillin) and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) being frequent culprits. Reactions to radiocontrast media, anesthetics (neuromuscular blocking agents), and biologics (monoclonal antibodies) are also serious concerns in hospital settings. **Insect venom**, primarily from Hymenoptera stings (bees, wasps, hornets, and fire ants), is a common and highly potent trigger, frequently leading to severe reactions and mortality in susceptible individuals, such as the example provided in the source material involving multiple bee stings.

Several non-allergic co-factors can significantly lower the threshold required to trigger an anaphylactic event or increase its severity. These co-factors include intense physical **exercise**, acute infection, stress, fever, and the ingestion of alcohol. Furthermore, certain medications, such as beta-blockers, can exacerbate anaphylaxis by interfering with the effectiveness of emergency treatment (specifically epinephrine) or by increasing the risk of cardiac arrhythmia during the event. Underlying medical conditions, such as asthma or cardiovascular disease, are also recognized risk factors for increased mortality during an anaphylactic episode.

#### 5. Diagnosis and Differential Diagnosis

The diagnosis of anaphylaxis is fundamentally a clinical one, based on the rapid onset and progression of symptoms involving multiple organ systems following exposure to a likely allergen. There is no single definitive test that can be performed instantly in an emergency setting. Consensus criteria established by organizations like the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious

Diseases (NIAID) and the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) guide diagnosis, relying on the presence of acute symptoms affecting the skin/mucosa plus either respiratory compromise or hypotension, or involvement of two or more organ systems following exposure.

Laboratory tests, while not useful for immediate emergency diagnosis, are crucial for confirming the event retrospectively. The measurement of serum **tryptase**, an enzyme released primarily by mast cells during degranulation, is the standard biochemical marker. Tryptase levels peak approximately 60 to 90 minutes after the onset of symptoms and can remain elevated for several hours. This test helps distinguish true IgE-mediated anaphylaxis from other conditions that mimic its symptoms.

Differential diagnosis is critical because several non-allergic conditions can closely resemble anaphylaxis, leading to potential misdiagnosis and delayed treatment. These conditions include vasovagal syncope (fainting), which presents with bradycardia rather than the tachycardia often seen in anaphylaxis; **asthma exacerbation**, which typically lacks the systemic cutaneous and cardiovascular signs; and anxiety or panic attacks, which can cause hyperventilation and lightheadedness but generally do not result in true shock or laryngeal edema. Furthermore, non-immunologic histamine release (anaphylactoid reactions) can also mimic true anaphylaxis, emphasizing the importance of accurate clinical assessment.

## 6. Emergency Management and Treatment Protocols

Immediate recognition and prompt administration of therapy are paramount in managing anaphylaxis, as delayed treatment significantly increases the risk of fatality. The cornerstone of emergency management is **epinephrine** (adrenaline), which acts as a physiological antagonist to the effects of the released mediators. Epinephrine's alpha-adrenergic properties cause vasoconstriction, helping to reverse hypotension and reduce angioedema, while its beta-adrenergic effects cause bronchodilation, relieving respiratory distress. It is essential that epinephrine be administered intramuscularly (IM) into the lateral thigh immediately upon suspicion of anaphylaxis.

Supportive care protocols must be initiated simultaneously. This involves positioning the patient (often supine with legs elevated to combat shock), securing the airway, and administering high-flow **oxygen**. If the patient is hypotensive, aggressive intravenous (IV) fluid resuscitation with crystalloids is necessary to address the profound fluid loss resulting from increased vascular permeability. For patients who are refractory to initial IM epinephrine, a slow intravenous infusion may be required, although this carries a higher risk of adverse cardiac effects and is usually reserved for advanced care settings.

While epinephrine addresses the immediate life threats, adjunctive therapies are often utilized, though they should never replace epinephrine as the first-line treatment. H1 and H2 antihistamines (e.g., diphenhydramine and ranitidine) may help alleviate cutaneous symptoms like itching and

urticaria but have minimal effect on respiratory compromise or shock. Glucocorticoids (corticosteroids) are often given to potentially prevent or mitigate a prolonged or **biphasic reaction**, though their onset of action is slow and they offer no immediate benefit during the acute phase of the reaction.

## 7. Long-Term Management and Prevention

Long-term management of anaphylaxis focuses heavily on strict allergen avoidance and preparedness. Once a specific trigger is identified through a combination of patient history, skin prick testing, and specific IgE blood tests, patients must be educated on methods to minimize exposure. For food allergies, this involves careful reading of labels and strict dietary compliance. For insect venom or drug allergies, comprehensive avoidance strategies are developed, often involving specialized identification bracelets or medical documentation.

Crucially, all patients with a history of anaphylaxis must be prescribed and instructed on the correct use of an **epinephrine auto-injector** (EAI). Patients and caregivers must be trained to recognize early symptoms and administer the EAI without hesitation. They must carry the device with them at all times. Furthermore, patients should wear medical alert identification (bracelets or necklaces) detailing their specific allergies to ensure rapid and appropriate medical intervention in emergency situations where they may be unable to communicate.

For specific triggers, particularly insect venom, definitive preventative treatment is available through allergen immunotherapy (AIT), often referred to as allergy shots. AIT involves administering gradually increasing doses of the purified allergen over a period of years, effectively desensitizing the patient's immune system by shifting the antibody response away from IgE production toward protective IgG antibodies. Venom immunotherapy is highly effective, reducing the risk of systemic reaction upon subsequent sting exposure in over 90% of individuals, fundamentally altering the prognosis for those highly sensitive to insect venom.

## 8. Societal Impact and Public Health Considerations

Anaphylaxis carries a significant societal burden, extending beyond the individual medical crisis. The rising prevalence of food allergies, especially in Western nations, has necessitated major public health adjustments. Food labeling regulations, such as those mandated by the Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) in the US, require clear identification of major allergens in packaged foods, promoting transparency and reducing accidental exposures.

In educational settings, schools and daycare facilities must implement comprehensive policies regarding food preparation, classroom management, and emergency response to protect allergic students. Mandates in many jurisdictions now require schools to stock epinephrine auto-injectors and train non-medical personnel (e.g., teachers and administrators) in their use, ensuring rapid

access to life-saving medication. The psychological impact on both patients and families is also profound, involving chronic anxiety, fear of exposure, and reduced quality of life due to necessary lifestyle restrictions.

Economically, anaphylaxis contributes to substantial healthcare costs, encompassing emergency room visits, hospitalizations, prescription costs for auto-injectors, and the ongoing expense of allergy consultations and diagnostic testing. Public health campaigns focusing on anaphylaxis awareness, proper first aid, and the correct storage and administration of epinephrine are essential components of mitigating the risk and ensuring that the public understands the seriousness of rapid-onset allergic reactions.

## 9. Current Research and Debates

Current research into anaphylaxis focuses on several key areas, including improving diagnostics, developing better preventative therapies, and investigating mechanisms of refractory shock. One active area involves identifying novel biomarkers that are more sensitive and specific than tryptase, particularly biomarkers that peak earlier and persist longer, to provide definitive confirmation even in delayed presentation cases. Research into platelet-activating factor (PAF) metabolites, which correlate strongly with shock, is promising in this regard.

Pharmaceutical development is aimed at safer and more effective treatments. While epinephrine remains undisputed as the first-line treatment, researchers are exploring novel agents, such as monoclonal antibodies that target IgE (like Omalizumab), which may offer preventive benefits, particularly for individuals with refractory or idiopathic anaphylaxis. Furthermore, ongoing clinical trials are investigating alternative routes of epinephrine administration, such as sublingual or intranasal delivery systems, which could potentially offer faster and less invasive delivery than the traditional intramuscular route.

Significant debate persists regarding the true incidence of biphasic reactions and the optimal duration of post-anaphylaxis observation. While protocols typically recommend prolonged observation, studies vary widely on the frequency of recurrence, leading to inconsistencies in clinical practice. Understanding the precise immunological factors that predispose an individual to biphasic recurrence is a major objective, aiming to stratify patient risk and tailor hospital discharge decisions more effectively.

## Further Reading

[Anaphylaxis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology \(AAAAI\) on Anaphylaxis](#)

[Pathophysiology of Anaphylaxis \(NIH Review\)](#)