Guidelines for the management of anaphylaxis in the emergency department

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Abstract
An algorithm for the emergency treatment of anaphylaxis is presented. The need for early hands-on involvement of senior personnel is stressed. Continuous assessment, monitoring of response to treatment, and a low threshold for hospital admission for observation and further treatment if necessary are required.

Keywords: anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis may be unpredictable in onset and may have a fulminant course. Fifty per cent of deaths occur in the first hour which yet prompt treatment is usually highly effective. There is evidence that senior house officers in emergency departments cannot deal with anaphylaxis effectively and the present group of guidelines are not designed as a basis for anaphylaxis, treatment in the emergency department should be directed to the specific grade as it is encountered. However, continuous assessment monitoring is required to detecting those who are deteriorating and require more aggressive treatment.

Well localised skin manifestations (urticaria, flushing) are an allergic reaction but not true anaphylaxis; classification of grade I emphasises the point that even mild and well localised allergic symptoms may herald life threatening respiratory compromise and cardiovascular collapse.

Patients with symptoms and signs of true anaphylaxis with or without urticaria and flushing should be admitted and monitored for eight to 24 hours after stabilisation; 20% of these patients relapse four to eight hours after initial response to treatment (biphasic anaphylaxis) and a smaller number may have a prolonged attack with continuous and protracted disease. Although urticaria and angioedema are common features of anaphylaxis, absence of these symptoms does not preclude a diagnosis of a severe or life threatening episode. The features of severe or life threatening disease (grades III–IV) are bronchospasm, laryngeal oedema progressing to upper airway occlusion, and hypotension with impaired tissue and organ perfusion (shock), all of which may lead to cardiorespiratory arrest. Gastrointestinal features include nausea and abdominal cramps progressing to vomiting and uncontrolled defaecation.

Patients with anaphylaxis (grades II–IV) should be managed in the resuscitation room with high inspired oxygen, intravenous access, ECG and pulse oximetry monitoring, and a senior doctor should be summoned. Patients will be frightened and need reassurance.

ADRENALINE
Although sympathomimetics are not necessary where changes are restricted to the skin (grade I), the most important specific treatment for anaphylaxis is adrenaline.

Adrenaline should be given by the intramuscular route to patients with moderate anaphylaxis; the recommended dose by this route is 10 μg/kg (for example, 0.7 ml of 1:1000 adrenaline intramuscularly for a 70 kg adult and 0.3 ml for a 30 kg child). There is some evidence that the intramuscular route is
superior to the subcutaneous route, reducing the requirement for repeated doses. Nurses in the United Kingdom favour the intramuscular route for giving drugs parenterally. Adrenaline can also be given by nebuliser if dyspnoea does not respond to nebulised β₂ adrenergic agents.

In severe or life threatening anaphylaxis (grades III and IV), especially if there is evidence of shock, the intravenous route is favoured. Up to 5 µg/kg is recommended, a lower dose than with the intramuscular route (for example, 3.5 ml of 1:10000 adrenaline for a 70 kg adult and 1.5 ml for a 30 kg child). Half of this should be given very slowly while fully monitoring the patient’s vital signs and the rest should then be given in small aliquots if there are no adverse effects.

Adverse effects are more common when adrenaline is given intravenously, but the intravenous route is critical when there is poor response after intramuscular administration or if the patient is deteriorating. Reports that have condemned the intravenous route can be criticised on the grounds that they have not stated the dose or rate of injection, or that they failed to exclude causes other than adrenaline for the adverse effects witnessed.

An adrenaline dilution of 1:10 000 or greater (1:100 000) is recommended for the intravenous route to facilitate titration of dose against effect. Intravenous injection is an alternative in children if obtaining venous access is difficult or delayed.

Figure 1  Algorithm for emergency management of anaphylaxis. IM, intramuscular; IV intravenous; GCS, Glasgow coma scale; Fio₂, inspired oxygen concentration; I/O, intraosseous; PSI, pounds per square inch; ET, endotracheal; ALS advanced life support.
GENERAL RESUSCITATION
The ABCs of resuscitation are rigidly adhered to in severe or life threatening anaphylaxis, with emphasis on prophylactic intubation if impending laryngeal obstruction is suspected. An endotracheal tube one or more sizes smaller than usual is recommended.15 If endotracheal intubation cannot be achieved a surgical airway maybe a life saving procedure.

Adrenaline and infusion of intravenous fluids have a synergistic effect in the treatment of anaphylaxis,3 7-10 Significant hypotension (fall in systolic blood pressure of more than 20 mm Hg) and tachycardia are features of moderate (grade II) anaphylaxis and should be treated with 10 ml/kg colloid intravenous fluid. Higher volumes (20 ml/kg) should be infused in severe cardiovascular collapse (grades III–IV).

As soon as airway problems appear likely, or for adrenaline resistant anaphylaxis, the involvement of an intensive care specialist is critical. Adrenaline infusion,5 7 11 measuring filling pressures, and using other sympathomimetic drugs9 (for example, a noradrenaline infusion) may be beneficial. If the patient is on a β blocker, intravenous salbutamol or glucagon, or both, should be used. Glucagon is well established and should be considered in protracted anaphylaxis16: 1 mg boluses up to 3 mg (half doses in children) should be followed by an infusion of 1–5 mg/hour. Consolidating treatment with antihistamines and steroids should follow.

Conclusions
Key points which need re-emphasising are that for severe or life threatening anaphylaxis with cardiovascular collapse, immediate but careful administration of high dilution (1:10 000 or 1:100 000) intravenous adrenaline in a controlled titrated manner is required, with early involvement of senior doctors, and there should be a systematic approach to allergic emergencies with attention to prevention of future episodes.