Health Point: Understanding Allergic Reactions
What are allergies?

- Every person’s body is different.
  - People’s bodies can react differently to the same things.
  - For example, you may like to eat fish, but when your friend eats fish, she feels ill.

- Allergies are when your body reacts badly to things that are not usually harmful to others.
  - For example, you may have a friend who is allergic to cats, so she sneezes a lot when a cat is near her.
  - When you visit this friend, you may have to go to a place where there are no cats.
People can be allergic to many different types of things.

- Something that causes allergic reactions is called an allergen.

- Types of allergens are:
  - Food – some people are allergic to peanuts
  - Drugs – you may be allergic to certain medicines
  - Insect stings – your friend might be allergic to bee stings
  - Animals – you might be allergic to dogs
  - Pollen – some people are allergic to certain flowers or trees
Allergies can affect different parts of your body.

- Depending on the type of allergy, you may feel sick in different parts of your body.
- For example, allergies can affect:
  - Your skin
  - Your eyes
  - Your stomach
  - The body parts that control your breathing, such as your lungs, throat, nose, and mouth
Allergic reactions can range from mild to moderate to severe.

- Some allergies can have mild symptoms. For example, itchiness or a runny nose.
- Other symptoms can be more serious or even life-threatening. For example, difficulty swallowing or breathing.
- If you are not feeling well, it is very important that you tell someone immediately. Your support person and doctors will know how to help.
Anaphylactic shock is the most severe and dangerous type of allergic reaction.

- Anaphylactic shock begins very quickly.
- Symptoms of anaphylactic shock are:
  - Difficult or painful swallowing or breathing
  - A sudden, itchy rash on your skin
  - A very rapid heartbeat
- If you experience any of these symptoms, get help right away!
  - You or someone with you can call 9-1-1 for emergency help!
You can be allergic to things in your environment.

- Some people can have allergic reactions when they breathe in allergens.
  - For example, you could be allergic to pollen, grass, mold, dust, or animals and feel sick when you are near these things.

- Symptoms are:
  - Itchy eyes, nose, roof of mouth, or throat
  - Difficulty breathing
  - Stuffy nose
  - Coughing
  - Sneezing
Allergic reactions can occur by touching allergens.

- Some people can have allergic reactions when they touch certain foods, pollen, animals, and medicines.

- Symptoms are:
  - Itchiness
  - Scaling or thickening of the skin
  - Itchy, swollen, red welts on the skin called hives; hives can last from minutes to days
Allergic reactions can be caused by eating certain kinds of food.

- Most food allergies are caused by milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, or soybeans.
  - Other common allergens are berries, shellfish, corn, and beans.
  - Food additives (like MSG) can also be allergens.

- Symptoms are:
  - Stomach cramps
  - Diarrhea
  - Nausea and vomiting
  - Dizziness, sweating, and fainting

- Tell someone immediately if you feel experience violent stomach cramps, vomiting, bloating, or diarrhea.
Certain medications can cause drug allergies.

- Drug allergies can be caused by penicillin and other antibiotics.
- Symptoms can include:
  - Sneezing, nasal congestion, and coughing
  - Irritated, itchy, reddening, or swelling skin
  - Stiffness, pain and swelling of joints
You can be allergic to certain types of insect stings.

- Common insect allergies include:
  - Bees
  - Wasps
  - Hornets
  - Yellow jackets
  - Fire ants

- Irritated, itchy, reddening, or swelling skin is a symptom of an insect sting allergy.

- Rarely, insect stings can cause anaphylactic shock.
There is no cure for allergies, but you can help relieve the symptoms!

- The best treatment for allergies is to avoid the allergens that cause them.

- If you have food allergies, you can check food labels to make sure all the ingredients are safe for you.
  - Ask your server if the food that you are allergic to is in the meal you want to order.

- If you are allergic to insect stings, you can wear shoes, long pants, and long sleeves when you go outdoors.
Medications can also help treat the symptoms of allergies.

- A common over-the-counter medication for allergy symptoms is Benedryl.
  - Make sure to talk with your doctors and support person before you start to take any medication.

- You can also ask your doctor for prescription medications.
  - Your doctor may recommend allergy shots that can help certain allergies.

- You can be prepared for allergic reactions by having your medication with you at all times.
You can make your environment safe from allergens.

- You can keep your home clean so that mold and dust do not collect.
- If you have pets, you can keep them outside or just out of your bedroom.
- You can avoid smoking or places where people smoke.
- If you are allergic to pollen, you can use air conditioning and air filters to clean your air.
It is important to let others know about your allergies.

- If your supports are aware of your allergies, they can help you prevent allergic reactions by making your environment safe.
  - Your support persons and doctors can also help you treat allergic reactions.

- Always remind your doctor of any drug allergies when medication is being prescribed.
If you have severe allergies, it is important to be prepared in case of an emergency.

- You can wear an identification bracelet that explains your allergy.
- You can ask your doctor for an emergency kit, which you carry around at all times.
  - This kit contains an injection of a drug (called epinephrine) that quickly helps during anaphylactic shock.
  - Your doctor will show you how to use this shot properly.
It is important to include allergy information in your IPP.

- If your doctor prescribes treatment and medication to treat an allergic reaction:
  - This treatment procedure and medication should be written into your healthcare plan as part of your IPP.
You and your supports can check out these links to learn more about living with your allergies.

- WebMD Allergies Health Center
  - http://www.webmd.com/allergies/default.htm

- More tips on making your environment allergy-safe: