

Being alert can prevent the alarm

Self Care health facts column

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The recent Medic Alert awareness week highlighted how wearing a distinctive emblem can help prevent serious, possibly fatal, consequences of a medical emergency.

The so-called Rod of Asclepius – a serpent entwined around a physician's staff – has become the symbol of medicine. Asclepius has pretty good credentials; known as the Greek God of Medicine, he was the son of Apollo, and the names of two of his daughters, Hygieia and Panacea, linger on in health related terminology.

So it is that the Medic Alert Foundation has engraved on the centre of its emblems the Rod of Asclepius with the words '*Medic*' and '*Alert*' either side. Medic Alert is recognised internationally and the products are available through 10 countries including the US, the UK, Canada and New Zealand. In fact it's a symbol we should all recognise and if necessary alert doctors or paramedics too.

In Australia, Medic Alert is more than 40 years old; the non-profit Foundation having been established here in 1971 with the support of Rotary International and St John Ambulance. And now the Medic Alert emblem can be incorporated into a variety of jewellery – bracelets, bangles, chains, necklaces and sports bands; there's an option for everyone.

For all those really supersensitive ones amongst us, it seems we're allergic to just about everything. Hay fever is probably the most common indication of an allergic reaction (it's also called allergic rhinitis). Fortunately, however, although hay fever symptoms are annoying and uncomfortable, they can almost always be effectively treated, and often prevented if the trigger factors can be identified. These trigger factors include such things as dust and dust mites, mould spores, pollens, perfumes, and cigarette smoke.

Nevertheless, in some circumstances a sudden and severe allergic reaction can be life threatening. This is known as anaphylaxis or an anaphylactic reaction. Such a reaction generally occurs within 20 minutes to two hours of coming into contact with the trigger. The reaction often involves more than one body system – the skin, the respiratory and the gastrointestinal and cardiovascular systems may all be affected. So, consequences of the reaction might include an itchy rash, breathing difficulty, stomach pain, vomiting or a sudden drop in blood pressure. Common triggers of severe allergies or anaphylaxis include some foods, certain medications and bites and stings.



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Any food can trigger anaphylaxis, but milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, sesame, fish, shellfish and soy are the most common food triggers. Allergic reactions to cows' milk, soy, wheat and eggs in children usually resolve by the time the child starts school; however, reactions to seafood and nuts may persist.

Currently there is no cure for food allergy. Avoiding the offending food is the only way to prevent a reaction. Severe (anaphylactic) reaction should be treated by administration of an adrenaline 'auto-injector' (such as *Epipen*) as soon as possible.

Bee, wasp and certain ant stings can trigger a severe reaction in susceptible individuals; and as well, some medicines – both prescription (such as penicillin) and non-prescription medicines (especially herbal remedies such as Royal Jelly or echinacea) can cause an anaphylactic reaction.

Of course, wearing a Medic Alert product provides security and peace of mind not just with regard to the possibility of a severe allergic reaction, but also with regard to medical conditions such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy or heart disease. The emblem is engraved with the personal medical information you choose; and importantly, in an emergency, healthcare personnel can access more detailed personal medical information from anywhere in the world by way of the 24/7 hotline.

You can learn more about Medic Alert from the website: www.medicalert.org.au or from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's *Self Care* health information. For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or log on to the website: www.psa.org.au Click on 'Self Care' then 'Find a Self Care Pharmacy'.