

Life-saving drug overlooked

Only one area school board has a generic EpiPen in all its schools despite an increase in allergies and urging from doctors to make the life-saving drug more widely available.



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Barry Gray/The Hamilton Spectator
An epipen can save lives.

Hamilton Spectator
By [Joanna Frketich](#)

It's the simplest of lifesavers but for the most part [EpiPens](#) are overlooked.

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Only one of four area school boards has a generic EpiPen in every school.

The other three boards don't even keep track of what schools have no epinephrine auto-injectors on site.

While the Heart and Stroke Foundation has been highly successful in getting automated external defibrillators into a wide array of public places, including area schools, there is no similar push for widespread access to EpiPens.

Even people with life-threatening allergies themselves often forget or don't bother to carry one.

It raises the question of why so little priority is given to a saviour that for the most part is harmless if used wrongly but if not used at all could potentially lead to death.

"It should be in every first-aid kit," said Dr. Susan Wasserman, a Hamilton allergist at Hamilton Health Sciences and St. Joseph's Firestone Institute of Respiratory Health. "It's a life-saving drug for a potentially life-threatening condition so I think it is important to get that message across."

[Sarah Batchelor](#) doesn't want to think what would have happened if there had been no EpiPen at her high school when she had an allergic reaction severe enough to kill her.

"It's pretty scary," she said. "You can't wait for the ambulance."

The 17-year-old student at St. Jean de Brébeuf had no known allergies when [anaphylaxis](#) hit during a health class. She was saved by phys-ed teacher Carolyn Mossey, who used another student's EpiPen at the instruction of a 911 dispatcher.

The teacher's quick actions also follow the training given to staff at the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board to use any EpiPen available in case of an emergency.

That is one step further than the training at Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and the Halton Catholic District School Board, which doesn't address whether staff should ever use another person's EpiPen on a student in danger.

None of the three boards keep track of which schools have EpiPens and which ones don't. Instead, they rely on students with known allergies providing epinephrine auto-injectors to schools or leave it up to individual principals to get a generic EpiPen.

Only Halton District School Board has a generic EpiPen in every school. They are all replaced once a year when they expire. Jacki Oxley, system administrator, says the program isn't hard to maintain.

Batchelor, who is now undergoing allergy tests, urges all the boards to follow suit.

"It's really important to get them in every school," she said. "You never know when this could happen. You don't have to have a known allergy. If it happened and you don't have one, what are you going to do? And it's not just schools, but other places like rec centres and gyms too."

No one has fought for EpiPens the way the Heart and Stroke Foundation has raised public awareness and funds to have 3,210 defibrillators put in public places in Ontario since 2006, including 78 in Hamilton. Of the 43 lives saved to date, four are from this area.

All four area school boards either already have defibrillators in all schools or are in the process of getting them.

An act to protect anaphylactic students called Sabrina's Law came into effect Jan. 1, 2006, in Ontario to ensure school boards have policies, procedures and training in place but it doesn't require an EpiPen at every school or address other public places.

"In my synagogue they have a defibrillator, but we should have an EpiPen too," said Hamilton allergist and McMaster assistant professor. Dr. Joseph Greenbaum. "It's just not brought to the fore. People haven't thought about it too much. You need these types of events to highlight the need."

It's a significant issue considering seven per cent of Canadians are at risk of anaphylaxis from food allergies alone, says Waserman. The prevalence has doubled in the past decade. The predominant theory for the increase is that people live so cleanly now it impacts the immune system leading to allergies.

"Food anaphylaxis is rising in prevalence," said allergist Dr. Paul Keith, who is an investigator with Hamilton-based research network [AllerGen](#) and president of the [Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology](#).

"Many people who are food allergic don't carry their EpiPen even though they should and so having it in a first-aid kit would make it available. Also, it's possible when having your first episode that it could be severe. If it is becoming more common and these things keep happening, it would be useful to have ... People in Canada die of food anaphylaxis so it would be helpful to know if having epinephrine in public places would reduce that."

Epinephrine auto-injectors

Two are sold in Canada: EpiPen and Twinject

It is the drug form of the hormone adrenalin.

It reverses allergy symptoms by opening the airways, accelerating heart rate and improving blood pressure.

There are two doses: Adult for those over 30 kg and junior. But in an emergency, either dose can be given to anyone over 15 kg.

They are easy to use and injected into the thigh muscle.

Epinephrine auto-injectors can be purchased in Canada without a prescription.

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