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Back to School with Food Allergies

By Carol Ann Brannon, MS, RD, LD

Back to school preparation and shopping can be exhilarating. For parents of children with food allergies back to school preparation is stressful as preparation involves more than shopping for school supplies. The priority of parents of children with food allergies is the education of school administrators, teachers, and cafeteria personnel regarding the management of their child's food allergies. Like parents of any child with a chronic illness, they must work alongside school personnel to develop an action plan to ensure their child's safety and well-being. In addition, fellow classmates and parents need to be aware of any child with food allergies. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich can make a perfect lunch, but for a child with a peanut allergy even touching the hand of a classmate that has eaten a peanut butter sandwich could potentially trigger a fatal reaction. Knowledge is power and in regards to food allergies, knowledge is life-saving.

A food allergy is an abnormal response of the immune system to the protein portion of otherwise harmless foods. The most common food allergens are peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, soy, fish, shellfish, and wheat. While, children may be allergic to other foods, these eight food allergens are responsible for over 90% of all food allergies. The number of children with food allergies is increasing. Currently nearly 3 million American children have food allergies.

A child with multiple food allergies may be at risk for nutritional deficiencies, which in turn may impair a child's cognitive ability and health. A Registered Dietitian that specializes in food allergies can assist families in managing their diets; ensure they are getting in optimal nutrition, and that the pleasure of eating is maintained.

Signs and symptoms of a food allergy reaction can vary in severity depending on exposure. The most common symptoms include: gastrointestinal symptoms (stomach cramping, diarrhea, and vomiting); skin irritations (rashes, hives and eczema); and respiratory symptoms (sneezing, runny nose, shortness of breath, asthma). The most severe reaction is anaphylaxis, a rare, but potentially fatal condition that requires immediate medical attention. Anaphylaxis is characterized by rapid, simultaneous

onset of itching, hives, swelling of the throat, difficulty breathing, lowered blood pressure, and sometimes unconsciousness. Treatment medications may include self-injectable Epinephrine (EpiPen) and an antihistamine.

There is no cure for food allergies. Strict avoidance is critical. For some children just one bite of a food allergen can trigger anaphylaxis. Reading food labels and understanding the names of food ingredients is essential. Food manufacturers continuously refine, improve, and change food ingredients requiring the reading food labels prior to every use. Day care and school cafeteria personnel must carefully read food labels.

Cross-contamination, whether at home, school, club meeting, or church, is a great concern. During food preparation and serving it is critical to make sure that separate utensils are for food prepared and served to children with food allergies. For example, a spatula used to lift peanut butter cookies off a baking pan and then used for sugar cookies may leave enough peanut butter residues on a sugar cookie to cause an adverse reaction in a child with a peanut allergy.

The potential danger of a life-threatening food reaction can occur beyond the lunchroom. For example, accidental exposures can occur during field trips, school celebrations, or special projects like arts and crafts. Therefore, it is vital that parents meet with school personnel (administrator, teachers, cafeteria personnel, nurse) if possible prior to the first day of school to establish an action plan, anticipate any potential problems, and prepare an emergency plan. Parents need to ask about things like snack time, bus rides, arts and craft projects, school trips and who will take on what role in an emergency. The school staff should practice the administration of emergency medications.

The good news is that some children outgrow food allergies, with the exception of a peanut allergy. Living with food allergies requires careful management to ensure safety, but eating can and should be a pleasure and enjoyment!

For Allergy Information/Resources:

[American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology](#) [The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network](#)

Eight Top Food Allergens:

- Peanuts
- Tree Nuts
- Milk
- Eggs
- Soy
- Fish and Shellfish
- Wheat