

## Driving people nuts with allergy questions

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One in 100 children in the United States have peanut allergies.

Asking about the baking sheets was what sent the cookie maker over the edge.

Until then she had been pleasant, answering my questions about how her homemade baked goods had been prepared. I was at a festival in Harrisburg and my then-4-year-old daughter wanted an oatmeal-raisin cookie.

This would normally be a simple request for a parent without needing to quiz anyone, but my daughter is allergic to peanuts and tree nuts. As I looked at the table filled with sweets, the oatmeal-raisin cookies were down the row from the white chocolate macadamia nut and peanut butter cookies.

Being the mother of a child with serious food allergies is a true lesson in becoming hyper-assertive. You have to be vigilant to the point that you sometimes feel as though you are an interrogator grilling a suspect under a bright light.

"You say you used separate plates for the peanut butter and banana sandwiches and the bologna sandwiches, but did you use the same knife to cut them?"

Getting back to the up-until-that-moment-very-nice baker, the cookie sheet question ended our conversation. When I asked whether she washed them before making a different type of cookie she replied that she wasn't going to be grilled about how she made her goodies just because someone might break out in a rash.



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To an extent, I could understand her reaction: It is hard for people who don't have food allergies or know someone who does to understand all the normal precautions you need to take. They see a healthy kid standing in front of them and don't quite get why there is a fuss. I also have to say most people I have encountered are good about dealing with food allergies.

My family is hardly alone in our quest to keep our daughter safe.

The number of children with food allergies is rising in the United States and doctors are scratching their heads as to why. Estimates from the Centers for Disease Control show that one in 100 children are allergic to peanuts. The number who have life-threatening reactions to the legumes is much smaller.

Despite the research, some still don't take the problem seriously.

Just a few months ago a columnist for the [Los Angeles Times](#) wrote a piece saying that yes, some children do have food allergies that can cause anaphylactic shock -- difficulty breathing -- but most of the notion of food allergies in children is a "yuppie invention." Parents are so consumed with their children that they concoct any adverse affect to foods as a serious allergy.

There also are stories from throughout the country of parents asking their schools to ban peanuts and nuts from lunches, or at least from snacks and birthday treats. Their requests are met with a backlash of anger and frustration from other parents who somehow believe eating peanut butter at school is a rite of passage for kids.

I believe a ban is a valid idea for schools. Fortunately, my daughter goes to one that is completely nut and peanut free. All the children seem to get along just fine without a serving of peanut butter during school hours and there is no need to send kids -- either those with allergies or those eating PB&Js to separate tables at lunch time.

I also am lucky that the parents of children in my daughter's class are cognizant of her potentially life-threatening allergies to the point that at birthday parties or other celebrations they save the wrappers and empty snack bags so I can read the labels.

[Recent research](#) does show some promise for those seriously allergic.

Children in two studies were given trace amounts of peanuts and over time they seemed to lose their allergy all together, or at least get to the point where they could tolerate peanuts. That second outcome is what I want -- knowing that if my daughter accidentally ate a peanut she would be OK.

I say this because I won't always be at my 9-year-old's side. She will need to grow into a pain in the butt in her own rite. It is hard.

I also have serious food allergies and still fight the feeling of embarrassment when I play 20 questions with a server when I go out to eat.

As for my daughter, she will need to learn to nicely grill waiters at restaurants, gracefully ask friends at dinner parties what they mixed in the marinade and firmly try to coax cookie makers at festivals into revealing their baking methods without them losing their cool.

In the end, that is as critical for her as learning to use an EpiPen.

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