

Managing Food Allergies

One Child's Healthy Choice May Be Another Child's Health Risk

Childhood obesity, nutrition and educating children to make healthy choices are top of mind in many schools around the country. Managing food allergies presents another caveat in providing healthy and safe foods for a growing number of children. What might be considered a "nutritious" snack for one child may be potentially dangerous to another.

Food allergies are on the rise. According to the Food Allergy Initiative (www.foodallergyinitiative.com), studies estimate that more than 11 million Americans have food allergies of varying degrees of severity. The majority of these allergies are triggered by what are known as the eight major food allergens: **peanuts, eggs, milk, shellfish, wheat, tree nuts, soy and fish.**

Symptoms of an allergic reaction can involve the digestive, skin, and/or respiratory systems. When the symptoms are extreme, which is often the case, with a nut allergy, the body may go into anaphylactic shock. Anaphylaxis is an allergic reaction in which the release of histamine causes swelling, difficulty in breathing, heart failure, circulatory collapse, and sometimes death.

What can child care providers and schools do to help provide the safest environment possible?

Education and avoidance are vital to a successful management program. It may sound simple: Keep a child away from the foods they are allergic to. Unfortunately, it is not always that easy. Becoming aware of cross-contamination, understanding the importance of label reading, the ability to identify an allergic reaction, and having an emergency response plan, are critical when managing food allergies.

Keeping foods safe from cross-contamination is crucial when serving food to an allergic child.

Cross-contamination can occur when a product that is usually considered "safe" comes in contact with an allergen. Cross-contamination can happen through shared equipment or shared utensils. An example might be the preparation of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch.

The knife used to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches is then used to cut an apple. Or the jelly, which might have peanut butter in it, is used to make a sandwich for a child who is allergic to peanuts. This cross-contamination presents a danger for a child with a peanut allergy. Another example might be the preparation of cookies or other baked goods. A parent or school may make peanut butter cookies. Without thoroughly washing the cookie sheet, they then use the same pan to prepare sugar cookies, not realizing that the sugar cookies are now unsafe for a child with a peanut allergy.

Reading labels is another critical measure to providing a safe environment.

Every label must be read every time a product is purchased, or served to a child with food allergies. Labels can change. This can be due to products being manufactured in different facilities, or a change in ingredients. One manufacturing facility may be safe from allergens. The same product made in a different facility may be processed on equipment that also makes products containing allergens. Manufacturers may also change ingredients. An item, which may not have included egg as an ingredient, may now include egg on your next purchase.

When caring for a child with food allergies, make sure you have a documented emergency medical plan.

All those working with the child must be familiar with this plan. A child with food allergies may have prescribed epinephrine. Ensure that everyone caring for the child is trained and comfortable with the administration of all medications.

Raise awareness in young children by educating them about food allergies and safety principles.

Most young children want to help keep their friends safe. When educated on food allergies and the safety principles, it is heartwarming to see them ask questions about ingredients, remember not to share their food, and make sure to wash their hands. Education around food allergies helps to foster an environment of understanding and compassion rather than singling a child out.

~ Dina Clifford, Mind Flight LLC

Dina Clifford is the mother of two children with severe food allergies. After saving her son's life, the doctor informed her, that to ensure his safety, she would need to become his advocate. She then spent two years reading and researching food allergies. Realizing that she could not expect others caring for her child to have the same education, Ms. Clifford created a way to educate them "in a flash." Her "Beyond A Peanut" Allergy Flashcards help teach individuals with nut allergies and those caring for them the principles to stay safe.

Beyond A Peanut



"Beyond A Peanut" Allergy Flashcards incorporate comprehensive safety information, and delivers it in an easy-to-learn format. The flashcards introduce cross-contamination, the importance of label reading and always carrying emergency medication. "Beyond A Peanut" Allergy Flashcards aid in the education of students, faculty, staff and families. The education provided by these flashcards generates a greater understanding of the safety challenges around avoidance, and why vigilance is necessary in providing a safe environment for children with food allergies.

"Beyond A Peanut" Allergy Flashcards are specific to nut allergies; however, they have proven to raise awareness and understanding of all food allergies by introducing the same common safety principals. There are 36 color-coded flashcards on a metal ring, making them easy to hang in the office or the classroom. You can learn more about them at www.beyondapeanut.com.

