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GO TO ACTIVITY

Kids with allergies can die in school

20 COMMENTS

in [DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT](#)

by Gina, RN

35

Like many other parents of kids with allergies, I was very dismayed to see this article, titled, [Allergic boy, 7, suffers two heart attacks after teacher hands him chocolate nut in class](#), last week. It seems a boy of 7 was accidentally given a chocolate candy containing a hazelnut, to which he is allergic. After biting into the candy, he realized immediately that he shouldn't have it and spit it out. Despite quick treatment with an EpiPen after symptoms started, he ended up in pretty bad shape on life support after suffering a couple of cardiac arrests.

I read with interest the comments that the public left on that article. As I've seen before with other peanut allergy articles (namely those that discuss banning peanuts on airplanes), this issue was very polarizing. The teacher and child were equally blamed. People even blamed the mother, who wasn't even there until right afterward and did exactly what she was supposed to do.

I am almost positive that I would be one of those people saying, "What's the big deal? Just don't eat peanuts" if peanut allergies didn't affect my life in a huge way – my 4 year old son is severely allergic to peanuts. He's had 3 exposures, all accidental. The last one saw us end up in the Emergency Room needing IV's, oxygen, and several medications to treat his anaphylactic reaction.

I wanted to take the opportunity to respond to some of the comments I often read and hear.

"Honestly, 7-years-old is old enough to know what products may contain harmful ingredients and his parents should not expect the Big Brother state will always be there to watch over him."

Yes, a 7 year old boy is probably old enough to know better. Even my 4 year old knows that he's allergic to peanuts and needs to avoid them. But think about it. The boy is seven. Who would bet money on a 7 year old having 100% impeccable judgment at all times? I wouldn't. So while they may be aware of their allergy and "know better," the fact remains that they are just too young to be trusted 100% of the time. It's a dichotomy that society as a whole can't quite agree on and we can't have it both ways. Some say that a child of that age should be completely in control of this life-threatening allergy, yet I have heard first-hand about the police being called because a child of the same age was left alone in a locked car while the mom went into the store for a few minutes!

As for not expecting the "Big Brother state to watch over him?" I would absolutely expect him to be watched over while he was at



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There are stories about people in their teens who have lived with the same allergy all of their lives [die from a reaction](#).

Some people commented that teachers already have enough on their plate, why do they need to deal with what kid has what allergy?

Because these allergies can be life-threatening, that's why. I'm not going to be talking to my son's kindergarten teacher in the fall to warn her that he might get a tummy ache if he accidentally eats some peanut. In reality, he might actually die. We send our children to school with the fervent hope that the teachers and staff there will keep them safe. In reading several online message boards and articles, I have often seen this analogy: Sending a kid to school or another child's house where peanuts (or other allergens) are freely available is just like leaving a loaded gun out on the table.

Kids are by nature extremely curious and often want exactly that which they cannot have. It seems like a dramatic analogy, but the end result is the same as far as I'm concerned. Playing with a loaded gun or playing with a peanut can leave *my* child maimed or dead.

It isn't only peanuts, by the way. Kids are having anaphylactic reactions to dairy, eggs, and wheat. Some kids are so sensitive that mere residue left on a toy from someone having eaten a [cheddar cracker](#) can send them to the hospital with a reaction.

Most allergic kids have quick access to an EpiPen in case of a reaction. These are not a cure. For one, they have to be given before the reaction progresses too far otherwise they don't help. For another, they only buy you time to get to an Emergency Department. No one stabs themselves with an EpiPen and then thinks, "Whew! Glad that's over then!" It's not.

I have read some other "helpful" advice: "Just desensitize the child – give them a bunch of eggs, peanuts, milk and they'll stop reacting to it." This is like telling someone allergic to bee stings to put themselves into a locked room with a bunch of bees. It's ridiculous. There are desensitization clinical trials happening around the country, but the amounts they start with are incredibly minute and are given under extremely controlled conditions with emergency equipment immediately available. People in these experiments have had reactions to a few grains of peanut *dust*. It's just not something you do at home on a Saturday afternoon.

When I was a kid in school, we usually got treats on someone's birthday: homemade cookies, store-bought candies. Doing this now is like walking through a minefield. So many kids have allergies to so many different foods these days, you'd never find a product that everyone could eat. Why not cut treats out altogether at school? Provide the children with stickers, coloring books, pencils, little trinkets. Or at the very least talk to the teacher and make sure you provide a food that *everyone* in the class can enjoy.

Most importantly, keep this in mind: no parent asked for this. No pregnant woman ever daydreamed that her daughter would have blue eyes and a life-threatening reaction to eating a peanut. No expectant father ever hoped that his son would enjoy playing catch and stop breathing after eating an egg.

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 So when you read about people trying to ban peanuts on planes (and I have never been so amazed as I was while reading comments from people who were adamant against giving up their God given right to eat peanuts at 30,000 feet in the air) or if you get a note sent home from school asking you not to include certain products in your child's lunchbox, go ahead and be annoyed. Then take a minute to realize that we are just trying to keep our children alive. Yes, alive. It's truly not just a tummy ache that we're dealing with here.

"Gina" is an intensive care nurse who blogs at [code blog – tales of a nurse](#).

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Anne Montgomery, MD

1

February 3, 2011 at 2:27 pm

Thanks for this post. My son, now 20, had anaphylaxis after eating what he was told was a chocolate chip cookie, and turned out to be a peanut butter chocolate chip cookie, when he was 12. At that age he knew what to avoid and always read labels but sometimes even now he gets surprised. And in third grade, despite having 2 peanut-allergic kids in her class, his teacher had the kids make peanut butter sandwiches as an exercise in following directions step by step. He and his classmate were actually punished for refusing to participate and he ended up having an anxiety attack because he was afraid he could die. Absolutely schools have a responsibility to keep these kids safe. It's not that hard to enforce peanut-free zones or ban them altogether.

REPLY

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Nathan Johnson February 3, 2011 at 2:59 pm 2

I'm sorry for these unfortunate incidences, but there's another side to this. From the NY Times:

"Dr. Christakis notes that while it's reasonable for schools and parents to take basic precautions, there is no scientific evidence that nut bans are particularly effective at protecting children. But more important, he argues, is that limiting widespread exposure to nuts can make things worse. The "policy of avoidance" means that fewer children are being exposed to nuts, likely increasing their risk for developing an allergy. A 2008 study in The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology of 10,000 British children found that early exposure to peanuts lowers risk of allergy, rather than increasing it."

<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/12/15/are-nut-bans-promoting-hysteria/>

REPLY

Frank in L.A. February 3, 2011 at 4:03 pm 3

I am very sympathetic to the plight of those with allergies and that of parents who have to manage their children's allergy situation.

But, when I see statements like "Some kids are so sensitive that mere residue left on a toy from someone having eaten a cheddar cracker can send them to the hospital with a reaction" and that we should "ban peanuts on planes," with nothing but anecdotal evidence to justify them, I become less anxious to change my behavior to support their beliefs. Where is the evidence?

REPLY

Andi February 4, 2011 at 12:04 pm 4

I have some evidence for you! My 2 year old ended up in the ER with an ANA reaction after touching video games at a restaurant that is known for it's yummy peanut butter cookies. We were within a foot of her at all times and there was no chunks for even visible crumbs. This was before we were aware of her allergy, we would obviously NOT take her to that restaurant now. All she did was touch the residue and rub her eye and within minutes she was in ANA. So please have some compassion for those of us who have to live with the reality of loosing our child to this awful reality every second of everyday until we (or our precious children) DIE!

REPLY

LaraB February 4, 2011 at 1:22 pm 5

Another for you... at 7 months of age, my daughter swelled into hives NOT because she ate something with sesame in it but because I had sesame residue on my hands from eating a bagel. Like the poster above, this was BEFORE the allergy diagnosis and a frightening way to learn about it!

Hmmm...I guess I'm just another anecdote. My child would only be the stat you desire if god-forbid something tragic happened to my her!

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Translate

Anne Montgomery, MD

6

February 3, 2011 at 4:24 pm

That may be true in populations, but my son had his first severe reaction to peanuts from the crumb of someone's peanut butter sandwich he accidentally picked up at day care when he was <6 months old and still exclusively breastfed. We assume he was sensitized either prenatally or through breastmilk. Neither his father nor I have food allergies so I did not avoid any foods and in fact ate quite a few peanuts, so "early exposure" definitely did not help him avoid it.

After the peanut butter sandwich lesson fiasco, we were able to persuade our school to ban peanuts from formal lesson plans and to set up "peanut free" zones in the cafeteria. This was not to quarantine our kids, any of their friends could sit with them as long as they ate school lunch (which became peanut-free) or brought lunch with no peanuts. Other kids were still welcome to have their peanut butter sandwiches but they were no longer allowed to tease our kids by holding them under their noses. (This latter practice constitutes harassment as far as I am concerned, much like pointing a gun at someone; if you are 8 years old and have been told repeatedly that peanuts can kill you, a peanut butter sandwich looks just as deadly as a gun and causes pretty significant anxiety.)

I never advocated for a ban, just for common sense, reasonable caution, and sensitivity.

REPLY

Jim (UK) February 3, 2011 at 4:35 pm

7

I haven't eaten potatoes in 40 years (now 63) because they would trigger a migraine . (Even potato chips) . And if I go out to dinner , I would let my host/ess know .

REPLY

Lynda Mitchell February 3, 2011 at 8:59 pm

8

The problem with residue left on toys or surfaces with young children is that their hands often go into their mouths after touching contaminated surfaces. Once that happens, it's considered an ingestion and it can trigger a systemic allergic reaction.

It's important to have an age-appropriate safety net around a child with food allergies. Little children need more of a safety net than older children, but even children in their early elementary years are not mature enough to fully manage their own food allergies.

Those of us raising kids with food allergies are slowly teaching our children to self-manage but even so, we look to responsible adults to work with us to keep our kids safe, healthy and included. And to forgo that occasional bag of peanuts just to keep our kids safe.

REPLY

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Fransie

Beth February 3, 2011 at 10:28 pm

9

Thanks for the article. I recently blogged about this same issue: <http://fiestabeth.blogspot.com/2011/01/not-easy-to-share.html>.

Frank, are you looking for evidence such as dead kids? Already it's been determined that upwards of 200,000 trips to the ER are taken annually because of food allergies. If they don't die does it not count?

REPLY

Gina February 3, 2011 at 10:29 pm

10

Nathan – I'm actually not advocating a peanut ban in schools. I believe it would cause a false sense of security. Vigilance is necessary. Peanut free tables are a good compromise I think. My son also has an egg allergy that he seems to be outgrowing... we were encouraged by our allergist to give him small amounts of egg every week and he's tolerating that well, so not removing the allergen altogether makes sense. Unfortunately my son's peanut allergy cannot be managed that way because of his history of anaphylaxis. His reactions have gotten increasingly worse.

Frank in LA – I believe my son's first exposure was from playing with (sharing toys) a friend who had eaten peanut butter before they played together. Seeing his 1 year old body covered in hives was all the evidence I needed. It may be anecdotal, but I lived it, and that's good enough for me.

As for banning peanuts on planes... What's more inconvenient: forgoing peanuts for a few hours or making an emergency landing in a city you don't want to be in to let off the kid who had a bad reaction to peanut dust in the air or residue on the armrests or tray table. Feel free to Google "Allergic reaction peanut residue" if you need more information.

REPLY

Ann Becker-Schutte February 3, 2011 at 11:25 pm

11

Thank you for this thoughtful article. We have been fortunate enough not to have food allergies in our home, but I have several friends who live daily with the fear that serious food allergies cause.

This seems pretty simple to me. If a child can die from exposure to easily avoided foods, then there should be a clear safety net to protect them from these foods. My daughter's pre-school is nut-free. There is a list of "safe foods" provided at the beginning of the year. Parents who want to send birthday snacks can choose from that list. I was initially a bit disappointed not to be able to make a fun home-made treat. I got over it. We made a fun cake at home, I took a treat that wouldn't put any of my daughter's classmates at risk. She still got to wear the birthday crown. She was not deprived of her "special day" experience. And kids were safe. It just blows my mind that this wouldn't be the bottom line. For all parents.

REPLY

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Steve Rose February 4, 2011 at 7:56 am

12

As a parent of children with severe allergies, reading this blog was very difficult. It reminds us of how vulnerable we are and that at any moment we could be in "Emergency Response" mode. Unfortunately, there are a few people in the general population that don't understand food allergies and associate our community as being high maintenance and over exaggerating our concerns. This is truly only a small percentage, however a vocal group that are generally not happy with most of their daily life. We, as parents of allergic kids or allergic ourselves MUST keep pushing our politicians and organizations through reasonable approaches to minimize the risk of exposure. I have been working with airlines for over 3 years and totally agree that most of the airlines DON'T get it. I have heard that Southwest is now changing and starting to understand, but cannot confirm. One Canadian airline WestJet is the only airline I've seen that has formally taken all nuts off planes and asks everyone on board to not eat the allergen. Why do they do this? They don't have a "business class section". Most airlines like to protect their business and first class customers and seem to think they MUST have their nuts on planes. If you ask most folks in these premiere seats, they are more than happy not to eat nuts to prevent someone in coach from dying!!!

As for daily life...more and more businesses are starting to recognize the power of accommodating our community. We have found many restaurants that are now willing to adjust their processes to ensure a safe dining experience. We started AllerDine.com two years ago to share this information in our community.

With Schools, every school is different and can be very frustrating to break through their administration. Be "in their face" as much as you can. These are our children's lives they are playing with...they MUST understand. Make them understand with the use of statistics, videos from FAAN and unfortunately two very recent cases of school related attacks.

Stay safe...enjoy the SuperBowl – please check where they are ordering food from or the ingredients they are using for food. Read every label and if not sure, don't eat it. Bring back up food or check for a restaurant that can accommodate your needs.

Steve Rose
Founder of AllerDine.com

REPLY

Anne Montgomery, MD

13

February 4, 2011 at 11:51 am

Alaska and Horizon airlines do not serve peanuts. (I remember when my son was little getting down on my hands and knees looking for dropped peanuts in our row on the plane. If I didn't find them, he certainly would have.)

Appreciate Steve's last paragraph above—that's what life is like. Don't eat anything homemade/without a label unless you made it yourself or watched it being made. Oh, and be sure you always have an EpiPen handy just in case.

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Gina February 4, 2011 at 12:36 pm

14

Southwest was very accomodating last time we flew in October. I called the airline after buying our tickets online, explained the situation, and they were fantastic. We just had to tell the ticket agent when we arrived and they sent a message to the gate agent and that was all that was needed. They could not promise that others wouldn't bring peanuts, but they didn't serve them.

REPLY

Melissa Gensch February 4, 2011 at 12:41 pm

15

I have a husband and son with life threatening food allergies. Its amazing to me that people are still so ignorant. This is a very true article. To those who left comments wondering where the evidence is...its everywhere!! These things have been proven over and over again and people die from these very real things. We don't care if you understand why it happens.....just suck it up and help us keep our family members alive despite your own ignorance. I'm really sick of stupidity standing in the way of food allergy management. FYI....the NY times had it all wrong....proven many times over! Believing everything you read is another sign of ignorance...

REPLY

Robin Tryloff February 4, 2011 at 1:17 pm

16

I would like to second many of the excellent comments above in support of those with allergies. I was born with many allergies. I had nine years of desensitizing shots to minimize them, but the doctor said that my peanut allergy is so severe, I cannot even tolerate the small amount in the shots. For those who think four-year-olds should be able to manage their allergies, I am over 50 and still run into people who think "I am allergic" means "I don't like." I cannot tell you how many times I have informed an adult of my allergies, they have assured me the food they made is OK, I have take one bite and tasted peanut butter. Countless times they have responded, "You didn't say you were allergic to peanut butter!" I wonder what they think peanut butter is made from? I try to only eat food I make — eating in restaurants only when absolutely unavoidable (i.e. for business). Just last week my sister made my mother's recipe for chocolate cake, which I have been eating my entire life. When I had a reaction, she had to walk through her steps in making it to figure out how she had contaminated the cake. Banning peanuts is just a small step. Do people really rely on schools to provide their children exposure to foods so they will not develop allergies? As human beings, we need food to survive; please think about the quality of life we face as the very thing we need to live and thrive can kill us. Not only is eating (anything not prepared by myself) not a pleasure, it's frightening. I am so envious of those who read a restaurant menu just to see what they are in the mood for, while I read it to see what, if anything I can eat, and then put my life in the hands of a server who may or may not understand or care about my allergies. For those who do not understand, I often use this analogy. When you say to me, there may have been nuts or cross-contamination in the kitchen,

Search Kevin M.D. says
I'm pretty sure nothing you are allergic to is in the food. I suggest they substitute the words "rat poison" for nuts, and think whether they would eat that food.

REPLY

Rosie February 4, 2011 at 1:17 pm 17

Thank you for this article. I am an adult that's lived with a peanut allergy since my youth that even my own relatives do not take seriously, no matter how many times I've been in the ER after accidental digestion. It's very disheartening that regardless of how it's stressed to people, they don't seem to take the fact that food allergies could in fact lead to death, and even seem exasperated by the inconvenience it might pose to them.

REPLY

Ruth February 4, 2011 at 1:44 pm 18

My husband has severe allergies to eggs, milk, soy, and shellfish. This makes eating fast food and most pre-packaged snacks impossible. Peanuts are actually one of the few safe snacks he can eat while traveling! However, we have gone without eating on long flights to keep other allergic passengers safe (the flight attendants announced that for the passenger's safety, no one could eat outside food brought on board; they then served a snack mix with a cheese coating).

It would be great if the public were educated with true facts about allergies, rather than relying on conflicting anecdotes. Most people just don't understand the difference between allergy and intolerance, or the range of severity of allergic reactions.

I'm interested in the long term psychological impact that can occur from having such severe allergies at a young age. Even these comments show hints of anxiety and panic attacks.

REPLY

just a patient February 4, 2011 at 2:22 pm 19

I'm allergic to soy & certain types of shellfish (crab, shrimp & calamari, but not lobster or bivalves). My 4-year-old nephew is allergic to tree nuts. We both have Epi Pens.

I can control what I eat. I've been taking allergy shots for 3 years to desensitize me to other allergens. I'm the poster child for what allergists want to have happen when someone does the shot regimine. They have worked. I can eat small amounts of tofu & shrimp without reacting, a first in my life.

My nephew? He's had multiple anaphylactic reactions in the last 2 years. The first time he ever ate a pecan, his face swelled & he stopped breathing. Only the fact that my brother is a pharmacist who recognized the signs and got him to an ER within a few minutes saved him (there was a 3-day hospital stay afterwards to stabilize him). He doesn't eat anything that his parents or his grandparents haven't given him. When I make desserts for family dinners, they have to be homemade (no box cakes, since all of them are produced in factories that are also used to produce items

Search for links (0 results) and they can't contain any nut products, including nut oils.

REPLY

Lindalou February 4, 2011 at 2:47 pm

20

Thank you for your post and for those with positive and understanding replies. I do get tired of those who act as though they'll die if they can't eat peanuts on a plane. Sometimes I wish the most negative would wake up with a food allergy someday just to experience what it's like. It can happen you know. I know someone who, out of the blue, in his late 20's, was all of the sudden allergic to all nuts. Quite a lesson to learn. Even my father wanted to argue about my son's allergy. Not sure why he thought he knew more than the highly respected allergist we were seeing. It is a crazy and difficult life. I constantly battle everyone about how careless they can be with my son's life, even his father.

REPLY

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