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Parents and Schools Respond to Food Allergies

By Jean Follmer



According to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), "more than 12 million Americans have food allergies. That's one in 25, or 4 percent of the population. The prevalence of food allergies has doubled in the United States within the last 10 years. Eight foods account for ninety percent of all food-allergic reactions in the United States: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish and shellfish. Of these, approximately 6.9 million Americans are allergic to seafood and about 3.3 million are allergic to peanuts or tree nuts." Approximately three million of Americans with food allergies are children and many of their allergies are life-threatening. The parents of these children jump through whatever hoops are necessary to keep their children safe.

FAAN defines a food allergy as "a condition in which the immune system incorrectly identifies a food protein as a threat and attempts to protect the body against it by releasing chemicals in the blood." That chemical release results in an allergic reaction. Allergic reactions may present in many ways including itching, a metallic taste, breathing difficulties, vomiting or diarrhea, blood pressure drop and a loss of consciousness due to anaphylaxis. After exposure, allergic symptoms may appear within minutes or after a couple of hours.

Anaphylaxis is a serious allergic reaction that occurs quickly and may result in death if not treated immediately. Anaphylactic symptoms can include vomiting, diarrhea, constricted airway, fainting and swelling of the face, mouth, neck or throat. According to FAAN, "food allergy is the leading cause of anaphylaxis outside the hospital setting and is responsible for an estimated 150 to 200 deaths and 30,000 emergency room visits annually." An anaphylactic reaction is most common with peanuts, tree nuts and shellfish, but may also occur as a result of contact with other foods. The most effective antidote for a case of anaphylaxis is adrenaline and it can be administered in the form of an EpiPen or Twinject.

Due to the higher risk of anaphylaxis from peanuts and tree nuts, many schools have implemented or are considering some type of "nut free zone" policy. Some schools have gone completely "nut free" while others have designated nut-free zones in portions of the school.

"Los Perales went nut-free this year," said Los Perales parent Rebecca Cushing. On the radioallergosorbent test (RAST) scale that ranges from 0-6, with 6 being the worst, Cushing's daughter scored a 5.7 for peanuts. Her son scored a 3.3 for hazelnuts. Although her son's score is much lower than her daughter's, Cushing said the threat is very real. "He ate a bite of Nutella one day and had to be transported to John Muir. It (the nut-free policy) certainly makes it safer, but my duty as a parent is to teach my kids to ask questions. My kids both carry (EpiPen) shot kits in their backpacks."

Allergic reactions can vary widely from person to person. While one child with a peanut allergy could sit next to someone eating peanuts and not have a reaction, another child could go into anaphylactic shock due to the peanut dust in the air. While some allergies can improve or worsen over time, allergies to peanuts and tree nuts rarely improve.

Springhill Elementary parent Wendy Gilbert, said they discovered their son's food allergies when he was an infant. "We had Alex allergy tested when he was six months old, before solid food, because he was getting hives. It turned out that we were giving him hives from touching food before touching him," said Gilbert. Alex can have an anaphylactic reaction to peanuts, tree nuts, milk, casein, wheat and eggs. "He is also allergic to soy, oats and beef. These foods give him GI problems, but do not require an EpiPen," said Gilbert.

The Gilberts take many precautions to avoid an allergic reaction. "At home, we do not have peanuts

in the house, but we eat other food that Alex is allergic to. I am A-type about cleaning the kitchen counters and preparing food separately for Alex, but dinner is usually something that all of us can eat. When Alex visits a friend's house, I send a lunchbox with food that he can eat and ask if the parents have nuts on the tables," said Gilbert. Gilbert said Springhill has been very proactive and helpful with Alex's allergies. The school currently maintains nut-free zones in its kindergarten and special day classrooms.

Cushing said the allergic reactions can get easier to manage as kids get older "because they get better about washing their hands." The efforts of the greater community also help. "My kid's friends are so vigilant for them," said Cushing.

Acalanes Junior Danielle Lincoln is allergic to tree nuts. "We didn't really know about it when she was younger. It's gotten worse since she's gotten older," said Danielle's mom, Cindy Lincoln. Danielle recently was rushed to the emergency room with anaphylaxis after eating a piece of candy with a small trace of walnuts in it. Danielle has learned to be cautious about what she eats. "I have to read the labels on everything I eat. It's really different when I go out to eat in restaurants because I have to ask the waiters (if there are nuts in the food). My friends look out for me too," said Danielle.

There is currently no known cure for food allergies and their cause is uncertain. The best way to try to avoid an allergic reaction is to adhere to a strict avoidance policy. On September 20, FAAN held its 5th annual Walk for Food Allergy (in San Francisco) to promote awareness and education and to raise funds for research to find a cure for food allergies. Gilbert said her family walked for the second year in a row. "I think it's great for Alex to see so many kids with allergies just like him," said Gilbert.

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