

Food Allergies

Children with food allergies can pose challenges for parents and child care providers alike. Allergies of all kinds are the most frequent chronic disease found in child care. The Food Allergy Network reports that approximately 2 percent of the general population suffers from food allergies. That means 6 to 7 million Americans suffer some type of reaction to the foods they eat.

Which foods are the most common allergens?

Eight foods account for the majority of allergic reactions:

- peanuts
- milk
- fish
- soy
- shellfish
- wheat
- eggs
- tree nuts (walnuts, pecans, etc.)



What happens during an allergic reaction?

During an allergic reaction, the immune system releases large amounts of chemicals called histamines to protect the body from the offending allergic substance. These chemicals trigger a chain of allergic symptoms that can affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract (involving the stomach or intestines), skin or cardiovascular system (involving the heart and blood vessels).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can include a tingling sensation in the mouth, swelling of the throat and tongue, difficulty breathing, hives, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea and a drop in blood pressure. Symptoms typically occur within minutes to two hours after the person has eaten the food to which he is allergic. A serious, often life-threatening allergic reaction characterized by low blood pressure, shock and difficulty breathing is called an *anaphylactic reaction*.

What emergency treatment is available?

Avoidance is the most important aspect in the management of life-threatening allergies. If a child does eat some-

thing to which she is severely allergic, medical treatment needs to be immediate. The treatment of choice is epinephrine, administered by injection. Other medications such as antihistamines, asthma medications or steroids may be given, but only as a second line of defense. Consult with your health care provider about a prescription for an epinephrine administration kit (usually Epi-Pen Jr. for children). These kits deliver a pre-mixed epinephrine solution through a shot that anyone can administer. The use of Epi-Pen is considered life-saving first aid and therefore is not prohibited in child care. Take a kit to your child care program and provide instructions in its use. Check the expiration date periodically on each kit to make sure the contents have not expired.

What should I tell my child care provider?

You or your child's health care provider should tell any one who cares for your child about your child's specific allergies and what to do in an emergency. Be sure to include the following:

- What foods your child is allergic to.
- What symptoms your child typically has.
- The treatment of choice for your child.
- How the child care provider can contact you in an emergency.
- The side effects and possible negative effects of the treatment of choice.
- How to use an Epi-Pen Jr., if that is the emergency treatment your child will need (you can practice with a demonstration Epi-Pen Jr. that does not contain medication).
- If an injection of epinephrine appears necessary, the child care provider should call 911 to have your child transported to the hospital. *Under no circumstances should the child care provider attempt to drive your child to the hospital.*

Working with your child care provider

Developing a plan of action with your child care provider can be a critical factor in saving your child's life. Ask for your provider's support in reducing or eliminating potential allergens from the child care home or center. With specific allergies such as peanut allergies, total elimination of the food is recommended. Everyone need to read food labels carefully. Ask your provider to communicate with other parents, so when treats are brought from home (birthdays, holidays, etc.), they are aware of any special food needs.

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