

## **Children's Food Allergies**

Although many parents believe that their child has food allergies, only about eight percent of children truly are food allergic. While any food can cause an allergy, 95% are due to milk, eggs, wheat, soybeans, shellfish, fish, peanuts, and tree nuts (like walnuts). Food allergies are often inherited and are frequently associated with other allergic conditions, such as eczema, asthma, or hay fever.

Symptoms of food allergy include vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, hives, swelling, itchy red skin, swelling of the lips, tongue or mouth, tightness in the throat, difficulty breathing, and wheezing.

Symptoms can begin almost immediately or appear days after eating the offending food. For that reason, it is sometimes difficult for parents to figure out what food is responsible. Keeping a diary for a few weeks and recording what foods your child has been eating, especially new foods, and when he develops symptoms may help figure out what he is allergic to. If you notice a food allergy symptom and a particular food, omit the food from your child's diet and see if there is any improvement in your child's symptoms. If the symptoms disappear, then eliminate the food from your child's diet for a certain period of time.

If the symptoms persist, consult a nutrition expert or seek a medical opinion. Do not go to extremes in eliminating foods from your child's diet as you can jeopardize his nutritional status. It is best to have a food allergy confirmed.

Once you determine what your child is allergic to, it is important to learn to read food labels because the food your child is allergic to may be an ingredient of many other foods. You should also avoid eating foods that may have been prepared using equipment that was also used to prepare the types of food that your child is allergic to.

When trying to determine what your child is allergic to, parents often incorrectly assume that if he has eaten a food before and not had problems, then he probably is not allergic to that food. They usually only suspect new foods as being able to cause a food allergy. However, it is important to keep in mind that it takes time for the immune system to build up a reaction against something that the body is allergic to. It may take days, weeks, months or even years to build up enough of a response to cause noticeable symptoms. So your child may be allergic to a food even if he has eaten it many times before without problems.

In addition to avoiding what you think your child may be allergic to, children with more severe reactions should be evaluated by their pediatrician or an allergist. Testing may be done, either skin testing or RAST (radioallergosorbent test, a blood test to check for antibodies against certain things your child may be allergic to) to see if specific food allergies can be found. In addition, your child may be prescribed an epinephrine autoinjection device (such as the EpiPen) and should wear a medical alert bracelet to notify others of his allergy.

About 80 % of kids who are allergic to milk, egg whites, wheat or soy will outgrow the food allergies by the time they're three years of age. Kids allergic to peanuts, tree nuts, seafood, or who develop their food allergies after three years of age usually do not outgrow the allergies.

A growing concern among parents and physicians is the recent rise in peanut allergies in children. Peanut allergy reactions can be severe and in some cases may be fatal. For some children, even smelling peanut butter or touching the hand of a child who has just eaten peanut butter will cause a severe reaction. It only takes a trace amount of the substance. In a study of children allergic to peanuts, about 55% had an accidental exposure to peanuts in the 5 years after diagnosis. Over half of those who know they have severe allergic reactions accidentally ingest peanuts outside the home, most often at school. Children with peanut allergy were at risk for accidental exposure to peanuts through processed foods that contained nuts as a "hidden" ingredient, sharing food with friends, and by coming into contact with peanut butter during classroom projects.

Consult your doctor if you think your child might be allergic to peanuts and ask for a specialist referral. Learn to recognize the symptoms so you can act quickly if your child has a severe reaction.

If your child is allergic to peanuts:

- Think about your kitchen practices - it may take only a tiny amount of peanut to bring on a severe reaction.
- Check the labels of pre-packed foods including the ingredients list. There are many different foods that may contain peanuts, not just the obvious. It is recommended that peanut allergic people avoid all kinds of nuts. If you have any doubts,

avoid the food. and ask about ingredients whenever eating out. Be aware that Thai food and Oriental food often contain peanut ingredients.

- Make sure you always let your child's caregivers know the severity of the allergy and what to do in an emergency.

After researching peanut allergies, it came as no surprise to me that growing numbers of public and private schools across the country have banned peanut butter from their cafeterias. Others have declared peanut-free zones or set up committees to figure out what to do. In some areas there is quite a debate going on between concerned parents, other parents and educators. Those for banning such products argue that if we could even prevent one death it would be worthwhile. Those against such bans argue that it could create a false sense of security. Early signs of a reaction may be discounted long enough to delay treatment, leading to worse outcomes. They also contend that it's too much to expect parents of a nonallergic child to guard against cross-contamination of every food item their child brings to school. Bans could lead to lawsuits by parents of allergic children against parents whose children accidentally bring a cross-contaminated item to school.

Web sites used for research:

[www.PeanutAllergyResource.com/](http://www.PeanutAllergyResource.com/)

[www.parentsplace.com/health](http://www.parentsplace.com/health)

[www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)

[www.aillkids.org](http://www.aillkids.org)

[www.about.com](http://www.about.com)

[www.motherhood.com.sg](http://www.motherhood.com.sg)

[www.healthcentral.com](http://www.healthcentral.com)

First published January 2001 in "The Duet", Bucks-Mont Mothers of Multiples. All rights reserved to the publication and the author.