

Four tips for preventing food allergies in school

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Credit: UC Davis

Most parents send their children off to begin a new school year with excitement. But parents of children with severe food allergies typically feel real fear. Will their children successfully avoid the foods they are allergic to?

Infants and young children are most commonly allergic to cow's milk, eggs, soy, peanuts and wheat. Most of these reactions involve skin rashes

(eczema) or gastrointestinal symptoms and are usually outgrown by age 3. However, allergies to peanuts, [tree nuts](#), fish or crustaceans (shrimp and crab) are often more severe and can persist through the lifespan.

"About 1 percent of people in the United States have peanut or tree nut allergies," said Suzanne Teuber, professor of rheumatology, allergy and clinical immunology at UC Davis Health System.

"For some, the reactions are truly life-threatening. The most commonly implicated tree nuts are walnuts, pecans, cashews and Brazil nuts, and many people react to more than one. We are also seeing more sesame seed allergy in recent years."

Common allergy symptoms

An allergic reaction typically occurs within minutes, but sometimes up to two hours after exposure. Symptoms may be mild, with just an itching sensation in the mouth, or may involve swelling of the air passages, accompanied by wheezing and respiratory distress, which can lead to death within minutes. Hives may appear on the skin, and [gastrointestinal symptoms](#) may be present, including vomiting, cramping or diarrhea. The most severe reaction is the potentially life-threatening condition called anaphylaxis, which may cause blood pressure to drop and can rapidly lead to loss of consciousness and death.

Allergic reactions can occur not only by eating the allergy-inducing [food](#) but also through skin contact or even by inhalation.

Allergic reactions often occur at school: in the cafeteria, during class celebrations, or while making craft projects, such as those using peanut butter or walnut shells.

"That's why it's essential that parents meet with their child's teacher and

school principal to discuss the problem," Teuber said.

Here are four tips to prevent food allergies in school.

1. Provide information about your child's food allergy.

Prepare a complete list of foods your child is allergic to, possible symptoms of a reaction and medications to the school.

"Make sure they can recognize an allergic reaction, and develop a written plan with the child's physician to deal with emergencies," Teuber said.

"This information should be shared with the rest of the school staff and cafeteria workers."

2. Help reduce food allergens in the classroom.

Teuber also advises parents to institute an "only-from-home" policy, in which the child knows to eat only food from home and to provide teachers safe snacks to have on hand when other children get a special treat.

"Too often, nuts or seeds are a hidden ingredient in cupcakes or cookies brought from stores or other people's homes," she said. "Even if nuts are not mentioned on a label, ingredients may be processed on machinery that previously handled nuts, leaving residues that can cause a reaction."

3. Ensure appropriate storage and administration of epinephrine.

Children with a history of a severe reaction should wear a medical alert bracelet and have an epinephrine pen at school. The child and school

personnel should be instructed in its use. The epinephrine pen should be administered at the start of an allergic reaction, and 911 should be called.

Many people mistakenly wait and see if severe symptoms develop before taking action. Such delays have had tragic outcomes. Even if the child seems to recover, symptoms can recur and the child should be under observation for several hours in an emergency room.

4. Help teach your child how to manage his or her food allergy.

"No one should underestimate the dangers of severe food allergies," Teuber said. "But parents should also not be paralyzed by fear. Teach children to recognize what is safe. Practice with them ways to be assertive in discussing their problem, refusing forbidden food and asking for help if they feel they are having a reaction. Help them at an early age to develop lifelong skills to cope confidently with this potentially life-threatening condition."

Provided by UC Davis

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