

Kids & Food Allergies

Exploring the Hurdles and Hopes of Life with Allergies

By Melissa Taylor



Two-year-old Peter's third severe whole-body allergic reaction happened when a waitress brought him an ice cream his mother Julia, of Highlands Ranch, didn't even order. "I was talking and didn't notice," said Julia. "He took a bite (of the ice cream). I asked the waitress if it had eggs - it did. He's allergic to eggs. He immediately started drooling. I gave him the EpiPen because I knew it would be bad. At the hospital he still needed another EpiPen."

As Julia paused in telling the story, the other moms in Mosaic Kids, an allergy support group in Denver, gasped.

For Peter and other food-allergic children, food can be toxic. Even something as benign as a taste of ice cream could amount to an outcome similar to eating hemlock - a mere nibble may give the body a lethal dose. If the food causes a severe whole-body allergic reaction called anaphylaxis, epinephrine (administered in the EpiPen) can stop it if given immediately. Without epinephrine, death is likely.

According to Dr. David Fleischer, a leading food allergy researcher at National Jewish Health in Denver, food allergies kill between 150 and 250 children in the United States every year. In 2007, the Center for Disease Control reported that the number of food allergic children had increased 18% over the previous ten years.

Unfortunately, there is no known cure for food allergies, only prevention. Parents can only watch and remind their allergic children not to eat certain foods. But what happens when mom isn't around?

Many schools now ask parents not to send peanuts to class. But, some parents don't know to check labels for "may contain" or "manufactured in" notes indicating that small traces of nuts, dairy, and other common allergens could be present. The Mosaic allergy moms' stories about trace allergens in schools causing allergic reactions brings about a deeper understanding of their often misinterpreted protective nature.

Back at Mosaic Kids, Jane whose dark-circled eyes suggest deep fatigue says she knows people think she's a helicopter mom. "I hate being a food allergy mom, but I'm scared all the time."

Colorado Public Schools and Food Allergies

Most Colorado public schools don't *ban* common food allergens like peanuts. Instead, they provide separate eating tables for children with allergies. If schools don't have a full time nurse, a para-professional handles food allergic reactions, from hives to anaphylaxis. At the moment, Colorado schools have a variety of ways to handle food allergic children.

Making Delicious Food Safe



Suffering from food allergies doesn't mean kids shouldn't enjoy fun food. Author, blogger and mom dealing with Celiac disease, Elana Amsterdam of Boulder created *The Gluten-Free Almond Flour Cookbook* to offer her kids gluten-free treats such as the Double Chocolate Cherry Cookies (shown right). Visit ColoradoParent.com for the recipe and to enter to win a copy of her cookbook.



“My child could die at school,” said Jody, another Mosaic Mom. “Some allergy moms pull their kids out but I don’t want to home school.”

Jody is hoping that the recent Colorado Senate Bill 226, requiring Colorado’s school districts to develop and implement a policy for food allergic children by January 2010, will help keep her child safe. State Bill 226 intends to create consistency throughout Colorado’s public schools. It requires districts to develop a training plan for “appropriate employees in emergency anaphylaxis treatment” and to “create accommodations to reduce students’ exposure” to anaphylaxis causing foods.

“The purpose is to increase awareness and to have safety zones not food bans,” says Nicole Smith of Colorado Springs, founder of AllergyChild.com and a food allergy mom herself.

“The bill is a step in the right direction,” says Fleischer. “Every single teacher should be trained [using epinephrine]. There is going to be a day when every teacher will have a food allergic child. That day is not today, but it will be very soon.”

According to Smith, the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network website (www.foodallergy.org.) states that 32,000 Colorado children have food allergies.

Food Allergy or Food Intolerance

While many people mistake a variety of symptoms brought on by food as allergic reactions, the Mayo Clinic reports that “less than 8 percent of children under age 3 and about 4 percent of adults have a true food allergy. Food intolerance is much more common.”

“There are allergic reactions and intolerance reactions,” said Fleischer. The easy way to tell the difference is to look at the symptoms:

Food allergies: The immune system thinks that a food protein is BAD. The immune system makes (IgE) antibodies to attack the bad thing, called an allergen. When someone eats the food allergen to which he/she is allergic, the (IgE) antibodies begin the allergic reaction, such as making histamines. If the reaction is severe enough, it could cause anaphylaxis. Dr. Fleischer says symptoms like hives, swelling throat, itching and vomiting are an “IgE mediated allergic reaction.”

Celiac disease is a type of food allergy where the allergenic (BAD) food is gluten and the reactions happen in the digestive system. Gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye and barley, triggers an immune system attack on the small intestine. Celiac symptoms include diarrhea, abdominal pain and bloating.

Not an allergy but a food intolerance: Contrary to allergies, Fleischer says, “Intolerance doesn’t involve the immune system. [It is a digestive system response.] For example, in lactose intolerance, you are not allergic to the milk protein, you can’t digest the sugar.”

Food intolerance symptoms include gas, stomach pain, bloating and headaches.

Food Allergies: A Tricky Diagnosis

Diagnosing an allergy can be tricky. “There are allergists that don’t understand food allergies,” said Fleischer. “This is

more of an art than science. You can’t interpret the tests like a cholesterol test with clear established guidelines. There are three tests: skin testing, blood testing and food challenges. There are a lot of false positives with skin and blood tests for food allergies. The best test for food allergy is whether you can eat that food and not react to it – the food challenge; that’s what we call the gold standard.”

Celiac tests include a blood test and an intestinal biopsy.

Food intolerances, with the exception of lactose, do not have specific tests. The best test is an elimination diet: eliminate the food and see if your digestive issues improve.

National Jewish Food Allergy Research

Jill Slinkard, a clinical research coordinator at National Jewish Health is currently working with Fleischer and others, to research pediatric egg and milk allergies. They hope to gain

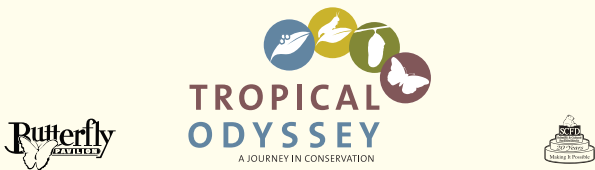


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an understanding of why so many kids have food allergies and why the cases are on the rise.

During the trials, if it looks like a child has outgrown an allergy, the child undergoes a food challenge. In the food challenge, the child starts out with a low dose of the food and waits. If the child reacts, the food challenge is immediately stopped. However, if the child has no reaction, they will continue to give the child small doses of the food and watch for a reaction. The food challenge continues if the child does not react and proves, by eating enough of the food, that he or she is no longer allergic. Skin testing and blood samples are taken throughout the trials.

Slinkard says the researchers hope to notice differences in the blood of a child who outgrows an allergy.

"There are kids that even though they look good on paper [with blood tests and skin tests] have the possibility of a severe allergic reaction requiring medical treatment. Therefore, the food challenge must be done at the hospital," says Slinkard.

Living With a New Diet

While there is so much unknown about allergies, those living with allergies and intolerances do know that you can still enjoy food.

When Boulder-based author and blogger Elana Amsterdam and her son were both diagnosed with Celiac disease, she went to work adapting and creating "safe" recipes. "I made it my mission to make food (my son) and all his friends would like," said Elana. "Kids loved my cookies so I developed recipes." The result of her work is her website Elana's Pantry and her recently released cookbook *The Gluten-Free Almond Flour Cookbook*.

"The hardest thing for a parent is watching your child not get that cupcake," said Elana. "With food allergies, we must teach them to handle the 'no' with grace and agility." ♦

Get into it! Radio Disney AM 1690



RESOURCES:

- *Food Allergies for Dummies* by Dr. Robert Wood
- www.foodallergy.org
- www.allergychild.com
- www.elanaspantry.com
- National Jewish Health
www.nationaljewish.org/ 1-800-222-5864
- Children's Hospital
www.thechildrenshospital.org/
- Allergy Alert Stickers at Mabel's Labels
www.mabel.ca
- Mosaic Kids group www.mosaickids.org