

Parenting Solutions: Food Allergies

I'm often asked if the number of children with food allergies is increasing. In fact, it is. Speculation abounds about the reason, and everyone seems to have a theory. Whatever the cause, whether our child's classmate or playmate has food allergies, or it is our own child, figuring out how to safely manage them is something we all struggle with.

What do other parents do?

Allergies can be frightening—especially anaphylactic allergies. (A person with anaphylactic allergies may stop breathing if emergency intervention is not promptly given when a reaction is occurring.) As a result, parents of children with food allergies are often hyper-vigilant about what their child encounters during their day. And caretakers, be they relatives, teachers, or friends' parents, don't always understand, or know how they can help keep the allergic child safe.

Some people avoid being in a responsible role for the child, in order to prevent an accidental exposure. A few don't quite believe that the individual is *really* so sensitive to the offending food. Many others want to help, but aren't sure what to do.

What do the pros say?

Dr. Hugh Sampson, M.D., professor of pediatric allergy/immunology at the Mount Sinai Medical Center, reports that allergic reactions to peanuts (for example) among children under the age of five have more than doubled in the past five years. He says that the only defense against food allergies is strict avoidance of the identified food.

For parents of allergic children, empowering the children with information gives the children a sense of control and also helps keep them safe as they become partners in their own care. By creating substitutions, one can foster an environment where the child has an alternative to the food that is being served. When the child is old enough, he or she can help choose, and even make, the alternative food.

It is difficult for someone not accustomed to food sensitivities to get into the mindset of safe food-handling practices. Reading food labels carefully to ensure that the forbidden food is not listed is of course necessary. But other practices that are less obvious are also needed. When a person handles a cookie that contains egg for one child, and then uses the same (unwashed) hand for an egg-free cracker, there is a risk that the crumbs from the egg-containing cookie get onto the egg-free cracker. This minute amount of an allergen can affect a child and make him or her ill. Using antibacterial hand sanitizers does not eliminate the allergen, as they only push the egg-containing cookie crumb around the hands. With allergies, germs are not the problem; edible, otherwise clean food is. Soap and water are the best ways to clean one's hands of an allergen.

The best way that one can be supportive of a child with food allergies is to have open communication with the child's parent. Never offer a food to an allergic child without the parent's OK, and be attentive of extraneous food crumbs or product in the environment.