

Raising Healthy Children: Food Allergies¹

Lauren Headrick, Karla P. Shelnutt, and Gail P. A. Kauwell²



Figure 1.

If you are the caregiver of a child with a newly diagnosed food allergy, you may feel scared, confused, and anxious. You are not alone. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over three million children under the age of 18 have food allergies, and this number is growing rapidly. Food allergies can be caused by many different foods. The symptoms caused by eating these foods can range from a mild skin rash to serious breathing problems. This handout highlights the causes and symptoms of an allergic reaction, as well as the steps to take if your child has been diagnosed with a food allergy. Also included are recipes and possible changes to your family's diet that can help make meal time easier.

Food Allergy Basics

A child's first allergic reaction often happens before the age of 5. Most food allergies are to foods that contain milk or milk products, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (almonds, cashews, and pecans), wheat products, soy, fish, or shellfish (clams, oysters, scallops, shrimp, and lobster). Other less common food allergies can also occur. The exact cause of food allergies is not well understood. Allergies may be caused by a genetic factor, a mother's diet while breastfeeding a baby prone to allergies, or foods other than breast milk or formula introduced too early in life. An allergic reaction occurs when the immune system is tricked into thinking that a food is harmful to the body. This sets off a reaction in the body that results in the symptoms observed. Most children "outgrow" their food allergies, but allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, or shellfish usually continue throughout life.

If a member of your family has a food allergy and you think your child may be at risk for developing one, there are some things you can do to minimize the risk:

1. Feed only breast milk to the baby during the first six months of life.
2. Avoid eating nuts while breastfeeding.
3. Avoid feeding the baby
 - cow's milk or other milk products until she is 1 year old,
 - eggs until she is 2 years old, and
 - nuts until she is 3 years old.

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2. Lauren Headrick, dietetic intern, Food Science and Human Nutrition Department; Karla Shelnutt, PhD, RD, assistant professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Gail P. A. Kauwell, PhD, RD, LD/N, professor, Food Science and Human Nutrition Department, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

Symptoms

A child's response to a food allergy is much like a snowflake: no two are alike. The severity and types of symptoms vary from person to person, and a child's reaction to the food can be different each time it is eaten. The symptoms can occur within minutes after eating the food or hours later.

Mild symptoms

One of the first clues that your child has a food allergy may be mild symptoms, such as a runny nose, sneezing, hives, or an itchy rash. These symptoms are often blamed on things other than a food allergy, but it is important to find out if it is a food allergy as soon as possible.

Severe symptoms

The more often your child is exposed to the allergen, the more severe the symptoms tend to get. More severe symptoms include abdominal pain, swelling of the lips or throat, vomiting and diarrhea, a drop in blood pressure, and anaphylaxis (pronounced ana-fill-axis). Anaphylaxis is the most severe type of reaction. It can affect more than one body organ or tissue at a time, including the skin, respiratory tract, gastrointestinal tract, heart, and circulatory system. Symptoms often start with flushing (reddening) of the face, neck, or upper chest or hives (red bumps that may be itchy) and then move to other parts of the body. Tightening of the airway, which makes it difficult to breathe, and a drop in blood pressure can result in anaphylactic shock, which can be deadly. If you suspect your child has a food allergy, it is important to check with your doctor as soon as possible to reduce the chances of a serious event.

Managing a New Diagnosis

What if your child has been diagnosed with a food allergy? Once a specific food allergy is identified, there are steps you can take to cope with the situation. The first step is to learn about the specific allergy and to teach your child how to avoid foods that may cause a reaction. It is also important to know how to respond if a severe reaction occurs.

Preventing future allergic reactions

Ingredient lists on food labels will become your best friend if your child has a food allergy. Learning to read food labels is the first step in preventing future allergic reactions. Looking for the specific name of the food to which your child is allergic is not enough. Some products may come in contact with allergens during production, which could cause a

reaction in children with severe allergies. For example, plain chocolate candy may contain a small amount of peanuts if made in the same building as a peanut-containing version. Federal law states that these products must be labeled "May contain..." if one of the eight most common allergens could be present. Visit the Kids With Food Allergies Foundation website (KidsWithFoodAllergies.org) for a list of ingredients that signal the presence of various food allergens. Also keep in mind that food ingredients can change. Be sure to check the label before serving a food to your child. This may seem hard to manage at first, but with practice and patience, meal planning and grocery shopping will become easier with time.

The second step in preventing an allergic reaction is to prepare the food so that it does not come in contact with the allergen. Clean all utensils and surfaces before preparing your child's food to ensure the allergen is not present. Finally, educate your child's school or daycare provider on the hazards of food allergies. Supporting your child in taking a role in preventing allergic reactions can reduce the risk involved with eating away from home.

Responding to an allergic reaction

Even with careful inspection of your child's food, allergic reactions can still occur. Accidental exposures to allergens are common, but knowing how to react can make a difference in the outcome. Remember, not all reactions are the same, and the more often your child has a reaction, the greater the chance that the reactions will become severe. Talk with your child's doctor to create an emergency plan and obtain the medications needed to treat a reaction. A form that you can use to outline a plan of action can be found at the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network's website (<http://www.foodallergy.org/files/FAAP.pdf>).

Changes to your family's diet

Taking certain foods out of your child's or family's diet can lead to a shortage of some nutrients. Replacing foods that contain the allergen with foods that have similar nutrients is a great way to make sure your family's nutritional needs are being met. A list of foods that can be used in place of the eight most common food allergens can be found on the Kids With Food Allergies Foundation website (KidsWithFoodAllergies.org). In addition, there are multiple food allergy cookbooks available to help caregivers prepare safe meals at home.

Summary

The cause of food allergies is not known. While some food allergies develop in early childhood and disappear before late childhood, others continue throughout life. A food allergy occurs when the immune system is tricked into thinking that a food is harmful and mounts an attack. Signs of an allergic reaction to a food range from mild ones, such as a runny nose or sneezing, to more serious ones. The most serious type of reaction is anaphylaxis, which can be deadly. It is important to remember that no two allergic reactions are the same. Symptoms can differ between people and within each person each time a reaction occurs. As a caregiver, it is important to pay close attention to all ingredients in the foods your child will be eating to prevent future reactions. While it may take a little longer to do your grocery shopping, reading the ingredient list on food labels is a necessity and becomes easier with time. Learning which foods are safe to eat and teaching your child and your child's caregivers which foods to avoid is also important. Even with your best efforts, an allergic reaction can still occur. Create an action plan with the help of your child's doctor so that everyone knows what to do if a reaction occurs.

Learn More

To learn more about food allergies, use the resources listed below:

- Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Educator (Look in the blue pages of your telephone book.) UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed online at <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu> or <http://solutionsforyourlife.com/map/>.
- For referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area, call the Florida Dietetic Association at (850) 386-8850 or check the yellow pages of your phone book. You can also find an RD in your area by visiting the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics RD Finder at <http://www.eatright.org/programs/rdfinder/>.

Recommended Websites

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention –<http://www.cdc.gov>
- Kids With Food Allergies Foundation –<http://www.kidswithfoodallergies.org>
- The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) –<http://www.foodallergy.org>

- Food Allergy Action Plan –<http://www.foodallergy.org/files/FAAP.pdf>

Recipes

Below are some recipes from the Kids With Food Allergies Foundation website (KidsWithFoodAllergies.org). For added safety and assurance, each recipe includes an allergen-free list.

Fiesta Chicken

Allergen-Free: milk, peanut, egg, soy, tree nut, gluten, wheat, fish, shellfish

Ingredients:

- 4 chicken breasts, cut up
- ½ c. chopped onion
- 1½ tsp. minced garlic
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 2 tbsp. vegetable oil
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- ¼ tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 can corn, drained
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 lime

Instructions:

Cook chopped onion, garlic, and red pepper a few minutes in vegetable oil. Add cut-up chicken breasts. Cook until chicken is almost done (still a little pink), then add chili powder, ground cumin, and salt. Stir and simmer until the chicken is thoroughly cooked (no longer pink).

Add drained corn and black beans. Heat through. Squeeze fresh lime juice and serve.

Red Hot Bean Dip

Allergen-Free: milk, peanut, egg, soy, tree nut, gluten, wheat, fish, shellfish

Ingredients:

1 15.5 oz. can cannellini beans, drained and rinsed

1/2 c. chicken broth

1 tbsp. lemon juice

1 tsp. garlic powder

1/2 tsp. onion powder

2 tsp. fresh parsley, chopped

1/4 tsp. cayenne pepper

1/4 tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. pepper

2 c. cooked chicken (cubed)

2 tbsp. margarine (dairy and/or soy free, as needed)

2 tbsp. Original TABASCO® Sauce

Instructions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Combine the beans and chicken broth in a blender and blend until smooth. Add the lemon juice and spices to the blender and blend to combine.

Melt the margarine and mix in the TABASCO® Sauce. Add the cubed chicken. In a 1½ qt. oven-proof dish, spread half of the bean mixture in the bottom. Add the chicken mixture and spread over the beans. Top the chicken with the rest of the bean mixture. Bake until hot and bubbly (about 30 minutes).

Serve with celery sticks, sliced carrots, and cucumbers.