

Nurse's' Nook - food allergies

A food allergy is an abnormal response to a food triggered by your body's immune system. The reaction usually happens shortly after a food is eaten. Foods that most often trigger allergic reactions include fish, shellfish, peanuts, tree nuts, eggs, milk, soy, and wheat. A food allergy can develop at any age. It is estimated that 1 out of 13 children has a food allergy. Food allergies occur more often in children who have other allergies or who have family members with allergies. An allergic reaction may be mild, such as just itchy skin, however in some cases it can cause a severe reaction called anaphylaxis with many of the following symptoms:

- Skin problems: Hives (red spots that look like mosquito bites), itchy skin rashes (eczema) and swelling.
- Breathing problems: Sneezing, wheezing, throat tightness and trouble breathing.
- Stomach symptoms: Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps and pain.
- Circulation symptoms: Pale skin, light-headedness, loss of consciousness and drop in blood pressure.

Anaphylaxis happens quickly and can be fatal. A combination of symptoms may occur. The most severe symptoms restrict breathing and blood circulation. Epinephrine is the first-line treatment for anaphylaxis. It can be given using an auto injector (EpiPen).

Educating yourself about food allergies, how to recognize symptoms of a reaction, reading ingredient labels, and when to administer epinephrine are the keys to successfully managing food allergies. After you and your health care provider have identified the foods to which you are sensitive, you must remove them from your diet. Tips for avoiding food allergens are:

- Read ingredient labels thoroughly, and at least twice. If a food does not have an ingredient label, it is safest to avoid that food.
- Read ingredient statements on non-food products, such as lotions, soaps, hair care products, and medications, to ensure these items do not contain an ingredient to which you are allergic.
- Speak to a restaurant's manager and chef about the accommodations you need before dining out. Order food that is simply prepared, and avoid desserts, as they often contain or have come into contact with food allergens.

When you have food allergies, you must be prepared to treat an accidental exposure. Wear a medical alert bracelet or necklace, and carry an auto-injector device containing epinephrine. Because fatal and near-fatal food allergy reactions can occur at school or other places outside the home, parents of a child with food allergies need to provide their child's school with a written emergency action plan. The plan should provide instructions for preventing, recognizing, and managing food allergies. It should be available in school and during activities such as sporting events and field trips.

Please be aware that anaphylaxis can also occur after an insect sting for some people.

For more information refer to: Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America/New England Chapter <http://www.asthmaandallergies.org> or the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology www.aaaai.org

Please call your school nurse with any questions you may have regarding Allergies and concerns.