

Daily Union Article
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Title: Food Allergies and Families

There is no doubt that having a food allergy is a life-changing health issue. If you have this type of diagnosis, you have to become a strong self-advocate. If you parent a child with food allergies, you have to be dauntless in making sure your child is guarded from the allergens that wreak havoc on their immune system. The physical effects of an allergic reaction can be uncomfortable at the very least, and life-threatening at the extreme.

Food allergies affect up to 15 million Americans and one in every 12 children in the U.S. has a food allergy, according to the Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) organization. The frequency of emergency room visits is alarming averaging one visit every three minutes.

Food allergies result when your immune system overreacts to a harmless food protein – an allergen. The most common food allergens affecting Americans are milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish and shellfish. These eight food allergens account for more than 90% of all documented food allergies in the United States.

Research shows that there is often a link to your family history if you are diagnosed with this health condition. Studies also show that if you have other kinds of allergic reactions, like eczema or hay fever, you have a greater risk of food allergy. This holds true with asthma, as well.

The physical response to a food allergy can be a very scary experience. Mild reactions may involve only a rash or mild stomach cramps, while other reactions can progress to severe anaphylaxis with low blood sugar and losing consciousness.

Anaphylaxis (pronounced *an-uh-fil-LAX-is*) is a severe allergic reaction that requires immediate medical attention. Food allergy is the most common cause of anaphylaxis. When you get to this level of response to a food allergen, you will have, among other symptoms, trouble breathing, tightness in the lungs, chest pain, and/or low blood pressure. Delaying medical attention is a life-threatening decision.

How does having a food allergy affect you and your family? Even a small amount of food allergen can trigger a severe reaction. This means that when you or a family member are diagnosed with a food allergy, you will need to ensure that food containing the allergen is removed from the diet and sometimes from the household, entirely. The food that was safe before has become dangerous to the family member with that food allergy.

Even if you leave that food in the house, the risk of cross-contact becomes a real threat. Cross-contact occurs when an allergen is accidentally transferred from one food to another.

Let me offer this example of how this could happen. If I am making scrambled eggs in one skillet for breakfast and also cooking hash browns in another skillet to go with the eggs, I might use the same spatula for both skillets. If I have a child with an allergy to eggs, I have just allowed that food allergen (eggs) to come in contact with a safe food (hash browns.) Even if my child doesn't eat the scrambled eggs, there will be egg protein in the hash browns from the spatula I used to cook both.

Something as simple as using a cutting board as a prep space for making sandwiches could cause cross-contact with anything that comes in contact with the cutting board after the sandwich has been moved to a plate. If you have a wheat allergy, the bread that touched the cutting board becomes a source of a food allergen.

Be careful not to confuse cross-contact with cross-contamination. Cross-contact is a fairly new term that is not universally used. Cross-contact occurs when an allergen is accidentally transferred from a food containing allergen to another food that does not contain a food allergen.

The confusion between the two terms results from public awareness of a similar phrase "cross-contamination." People are aware of this phrase through the efforts to educate the public about food safety. Restaurant and food service employees are trained to be aware of the risks cross-contamination has in relation to foodborne illnesses. Cross-contamination occurs when illness-causing bacteria from raw meat, poultry, sea food, or eggs is spread to ready-to-eat foods.

The potential for cross-contact is magnified in a food service setting. Although you can monitor this potential hazard at home, you have no control of this possibility in a restaurant. If you or someone in your family has a food allergy, you need to make sure you tell your server. You may even need to explain what cross-contact is and how you need them to request all precautions are taken in the food preparation area to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction.

Because of the potential risks for cross-contact that exist in commercial kitchens, families that are dealing with food allergies often choose not to dine out. In the past, these families were then faced with the challenge of finding recipes with ingredients that were safe for everyone in the family to consume. However, as consumers place greater demands on our food industry to offer healthy alternatives for meeting their food needs, new and creative options are much more readily available.

To help consumers with food allergies, the Food and Drug Administration has instituted strict rules on food labeling regarding allergens, which makes it easier for you to identify which foods are safe for your family.

Living with food allergies is nothing short of challenging, but with awareness and knowledge, you can equip yourself with the tools you need to make the adjustments. For more information about food allergies, feel free to contact me at the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!