

Food Allergies: Not just another health fad

Do you have a child or grandchild in school who came home with a list of “safe snacks” they can bring in to class?

According to research done by the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, 1 in every 13 children now has a food allergy. There are no definitive reasons behind this phenomenon yet, but there are a few theories out there. One in particular from the American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology states that certain living conditions are “too clean” and children aren’t exposed to enough germs that train their immune system to tell the difference between harmless and harmful irritants.

Whatever the reasoning, we have seen a 50 percent increase in food allergies in children specifically since 1997. So, how do we begin to accommodate this growing population so that eating can become less frightening and more enjoyable for this huge percentage of our population?

It is important to first understand what an allergy is versus an intolerance. An allergy is defined as a body’s negative reaction to a specific protein in food. The immune system mistakes said food for something harmful. However, an intolerance, such as lactose intolerance, are due to enzyme deficiencies that cause issues with digestion.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction can include: swelling of tongue and throat, difficulty breathing, hives, and vomiting. These symptoms can progress to anaphylaxis, a life threatening reaction to foods, within seconds.

Minor reactions can typically be treated with antihistamines but more severe reactions may require epinephrine injections, such as an EpiPen. However, 911 should be called immediately after an epinephrine injection.

There are eight major food allergens that are required to be reported on food labels. Milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, and soybeans. Ninety percent of food allergies are associated with these 8 foods. Even trace amounts of these foods can trigger reactions, which is why you see statements like “processed in a facility that also processes tree nuts”, on food labels. This informs you that your food is processed where one of the big eight allergens is also processed.

In order to maintain quality of life when you or a child has a food allergy, it is essential to find new allergen friendly foods or ways to substitute ingredients for those you are allergic to. Meal planning is essential because most convenience foods contain at least one of the big eight allergens.

Trying new allergen friendly creations can be an exciting experience and result in some creative dishes. Be mindful to avoid cross-contact between allergenic foods and food surfaces, however.

Meal planning also allow meals to be a more positive experience instead of focusing on what you “can’t have” because of your allergy.

And, for those of us who don’t have an allergy, try to be mindful when sending snacks to school or hosting a party. Consider things like fresh fruit and veggies, plain popcorn, applesauce, dried fruits, or frozen fruit treats as options so everyone can participate in the celebration.

Sources:

University of Minnesota Extension

Michigan State University Extension

Rutgers University Agricultural Experiment Stations