

WHEAT
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FREE

DEALING WITH

FOOD allergies

When your child is diagnosed with a food allergy it can be the start of an anxiety-ridden journey. **JOY ADAN** offers tips to parents who are navigating through the information maze

NUT
FREE

Think back to your childhood memories of food. Did you eat ice-cream on hot summer afternoons, swap sandwiches at school or use your finger to sample icing from someone else's birthday cake?

Most parents want their children to experience these moments. But with food allergies occurring in one in 10 infants and almost eight per cent of children up to five years of age, some parents are doing everything to avoid them altogether.

"The number of younger children being diagnosed with multiple food allergies is increasing," says paediatric allergist Dr Sam Mehr, who is seeing more patients than ever before. "We used to book a child in for a food challenge appointment within three months. Now, it takes more than a year."

Having your child diagnosed with a food allergy is often bittersweet. On the one hand you've confirmed what's caused her to get sick. On the other, you now have a world of risky foods you need to protect her from, which can be overwhelming. But, just like your little one, taking small, baby steps is often all you need to do to start managing this complex health condition. >

DOING THE SHOPPING

Egg is the most common food allergy in children, followed by cow's milk, then peanuts. Wheat, soy, fish, shellfish, tree nuts and sesame allergies are less common. Eliminating a major food group like dairy can affect your nutrition, so book in time with a dietitian to ensure your family maintains a balanced diet.

Before each grocery run, plan your upcoming meals. This makes avoiding specific ingredients or finding substitutes easier. Avoiding egg and milk is obvious, but identifying uncommon names of allergens (such as casein or whey for cow's milk) can get confusing. The Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA) website can help you identify specific allergens and food to avoid. Be sure to read the ingredients list every time you

purchase a processed product, in case the manufacturer introduced an allergen since the last time you purchased it.

FINDING ALTERNATIVES

Replacing common foods is becoming easier as vegetable- and coconut-based products make an appearance in larger supermarkets to replace egg and cow's milk. Soy formula is now available, as are egg replacers, wheat-free bread and dairy-free spreads.

Look for natural sources of nutrients that you're used to getting from foods like egg and dairy. Green vegetables such as spinach and broccoli are good sources of calcium, vitamins A, C and folate. Try mashing banana to substitute egg when baking, pureeing apple to replace mayonnaise in tuna sandwiches, or serving blended frozen fruit instead of ice-cream. Fruit and vegetables are not

only nutritious for kids with multiple food allergies, they're also less expensive compared to processed food substitutes.

AWAY FROM HOME

The easiest way to manage a food allergy in social situations is to pack meals whenever you head out so you know exactly what your child is eating. This can take some getting used to but it minimises the risk of allergic reactions. On a positive note, this is usually healthier for your child and can save you money in the long run.

LONG DAYCARE AND PRESCHOOL

While it's becoming common for schools to ban allergens such as peanuts, Maria Said, President of Allergy and Anaphylaxis Australia, warns that relying on their absence

Our son takes his EpiPen everywhere!



When mum **ETHEL MANALAC'S** second child reacted to his first bottle of formula, she discovered he had many allergies.

When my second child, Micah, was three months old, we tried feeding him formula. His lips puffed up and red welts appeared all over his face, so we took him to the emergency department and doctors gave him antihistamine straightaway. We booked an appointment at an allergist clinic that cost several hundred dollars, but by that stage we didn't care; we just wanted to get to the bottom of what was making Micah so sick.

At four months old we confirmed his allergy to egg, dairy and wheat.

After his diagnosis, the biggest challenge was eliminating food from my own diet, to avoid him reacting to anything in my breastmilk. It was good to finally find out what was making Micah sick, but making him better required a big sacrifice from me. I've eaten anything I've wanted my whole life. Suddenly, I had to change the way I was eating completely, read ingredient lists and limit my food; it was a huge shock. But at least I got to experience what my son would go through.

Micah outgrew his wheat allergy within a year, but that was replaced with a severe nut allergy. We keep his EpiPen and Action Plan in a cooler bag, which he takes everywhere. We have



We aren't expected to cater for and we always pack food for him!

a general rule that babysitters don't feed Micah anything that we haven't packed in his lunch box.

His grandparents cook for him and his sister, but if they want to feed him something new, they send us a photo to check if it's okay.

Our family was receptive to learning about his allergy so now the biggest challenge is eating out. I'm surprised because some friends go the extra mile to provide something for Micah at parties, but we never expect to be catered for and we always pack food for him, including a treat to eat while other kids have cake.



can create a false sense of security. "We certainly promote minimisation of allergens in primary schools and childcare facilities but we must not assume that a food has ever really been eradicated," Maria says. "Having a severe allergy is a little like crossing a road. Roads are never risk free, but we do what we can to minimise that risk."

Find out how different centres minimise the risk of allergic reactions. Ask how they communicate food allergies to new and existing staff. If your child reacts on contact with food, check that they ensure children wash their hands after every meal. Make sure staff members know how to administer your child's medication and go through their Anaphylaxis Action Plan so they know how to respond appropriately.

PARTIES AND PLAYDATES

Even though food allergies are quite common, it's unrealistic to expect a host to cater for your child, so come prepared with a treat she can enjoy while other kids are eating the birthday cake. "A child with a common food allergy might not be able to eat at parties. You need to teach them that's okay," says child psychologist Dr Judith Locke. "Teach them it's minor in the grand scheme of things. You can't cease production of all the food they can't eat, so start teaching them resilience now."

SPREADING THE WORD

Food allergy is a phenomenon that older generations didn't necessarily experience when they first became parents, so educating friends and family can be challenging. ASCIA provides reading material you can use, but usually patience is your biggest asset.

"Grandparents might confuse food allergies with intolerance or fussiness, and think the worst that can happen is their grandchild might feel unwell. Explain that allergies are common now, that they are serious and potentially life threatening, and that eating the food might make your child very sick or require hospitalisation," says Dr Mehr. "But don't make them so scared they fear being around your child. Instead, teach them what foods they need to avoid, how to identify an allergic reaction, and the action plan if it happens."

"People who don't know much about food allergies might scoff at your child's condition," says Dr Locke. "Be patient and educate them, but learn to accept they might

never understand the complexity of the health issue." Rather than trying to change their mind, Dr Locke recommends focusing your efforts on teaching your child to manage her allergy without your intervention.

EMPOWER YOUR CHILD

"Over time, you've got to start stepping back and let your child take responsibility," says Dr Locke. "You can't control what she will eat for the rest of her life, so teach her the questions to ask and scripts to use."

Even if your child isn't talking yet, you can still teach her about her allergies by modelling the behaviour she should adopt with food, like only using her own cup or cutlery and refusing food she's never eaten before. If she goes grocery shopping with you, read the labels with her. Explain that certain foods can make her very sick, which is why you always check what she's eating. She will learn these habits from watching and listening to you. When she does start talking, practise saying names of any food she's allergic to. Encourage her to repeat simple sentences like, "I'm allergic to nuts," or "No thank you, I have allergies," when anyone offers her food. When she gets to

preschool, role-play behaviour you want her to adopt, like asking what is in a new food before eating it, saying "no" assertively, and asking for help if she feels unwell after eating. Teaching her these scripts will help her understand she's responsible for avoiding food that might make her sick, and minimises the risk of her trying to eat food she isn't meant to when you're not around.

"The transition from controlled environments is often the scariest part for parents," says Dr Mehr. "A lot of them think fatal reactions to food are common. I try to debunk this myth when I first diagnose a child because it's rare in children. The paradox is that food allergy is common in early childhood, but death from food allergy in children is very rare."

The good news is most children outgrow the more common food allergies like egg and cow's milk. And the children who don't outgrow their food allergy are usually sensible about avoiding them. "I've yet to treat a kid who's purposely eaten a food they're allergic to," Dr Mehr says. "Almost all reactions are accidental. Parents can't prevent accidents. But you can teach your child, and the people around them, how to minimise the risk, and how to respond if anything happens." ★

