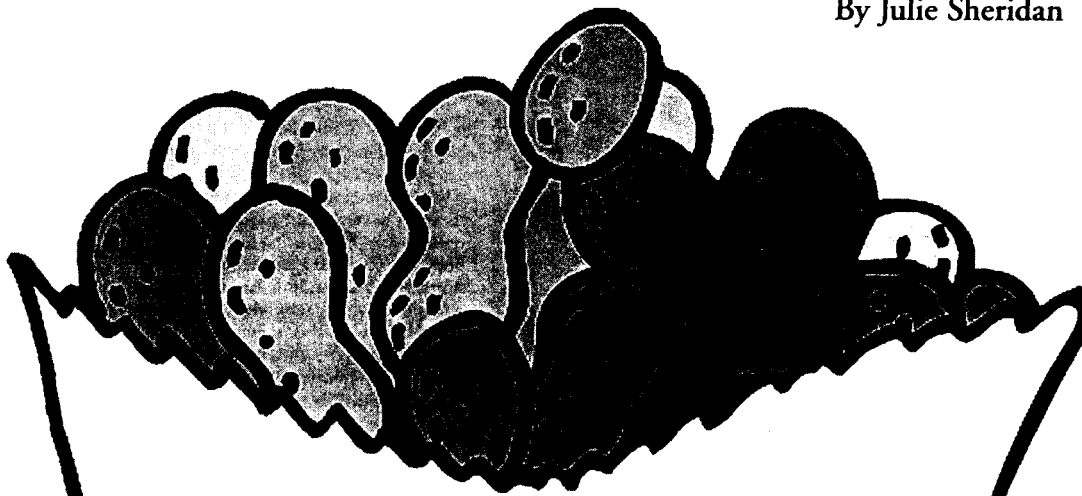


# Snack Attack

## How to cope with deadly food allergies

By Julie Sheridan



**It's Wednesday** — playgroup day — at the Jammin' Java coffee house and 16-month-old Tyler Willis frolics with his toddler contemporaries swapping sippy cups and snack packs. By all appearances, this is a normal playgroup. But what isn't apparent is the fact that Tyler has severe food allergies — allergies that could turn a "harmless snack" into a deadly weapon. For his parents and all who come in contact with this little boy, watching what he puts in his mouth is a daunting task 24/7.

### What is a Food Allergy?

Food allergy is an immune system response to a food that the body mistakenly believes is harmful. Allergic reactions can range from minor rashes to life-threatening *anaphylaxis*, a sudden, severe, and potentially fatal reaction that can involve various areas of the body. Symptoms occur within minutes to two hours after contact with the allergy-causing substance, but in rare instances may occur up to four hours later.

Some of the most common food allergies include: peanuts (the leading form of severe allergies), tree nuts (walnuts, pecans, etc.), eggs, milk, soy, wheat, fish and shellfish.

There are two different profiles of a child with *allergies*:

1. The child has an isolated food allergy. In this case, there no other allergens and no family history of allergies.
2. The food allergy is just one part of a whole allergic picture. This profile represents a majority of food allergy cases, often with a family history of allergies lurking in the background.

According to Michael Welch, M.D., co-director of the Allergy & Asthma Medical Group and Research Center in San Diego, Calif., children with the second profile tend to go through an "allergic march." First, allergies manifest themselves in the "gut and skin" (usually in the form of food allergies and eczema). Next, these

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children tend to develop allergies affecting the nose and lungs (hay fever and asthma).

### Causes and Cures

The cause of food allergy is currently unknown. While there does seem to be a hereditary link in some cases, other cases appear to be congenital.

What we do know is that there seems to be a two-part process to developing a food allergy. The first time the body is exposed to a particular food that it mistakes as harmful, it creates specific antibodies — IgE antibodies. The second time it's exposed, the immune system releases massive amounts of chemicals (including histamine) to protect the body. It's during this release of chemicals that allergic symptoms develop and wage war on the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, cardiovascular system, and/or skin.

Expectant mothers may wonder if avoiding certain foods during pregnancy might help to prevent food allergy in their unborn children, but Dr. Welch cautioned, "There is no conclusive evidence that would warrant mothers dramatically altering their eating patterns and virtually starving themselves nutritionally."

Yet there may be hope on the horizon. One research study underway involves using "good" antibodies — Anti-IgE antibodies — to fight the bad ones — IgE. Essentially, the Anti-IgE antibodies would prohibit the bad ones from triggering an allergic reaction. Early research is promising, but today the only way to reliably prevent a reaction is to avoid the offending food.

### Someone Else's Child, Your Concern

Gregg Durski of Ann Arbor was coaching soccer when he first came into contact with a child with food allergies. "When this kid joined the team, his parents gave me an EpiPen and told me that he was allergic to peanuts. I kept the pen in my bag, along with a first aid kit and extra uniforms, not thinking that I'd ever have to use it," Gregg recalled. He also sent a letter to the parents of other kids on the team instructing them not to bring peanut snacks to games.

During a soccer game one day, the food-allergic child started choking on the field. Gregg didn't realize what was happening until a neighbor of the family (the parents weren't at the game) told him that the child was having an allergic

reaction.

Immediately, Gregg administered the EpiPen

to the child and called the parents.

Someone had brought a peanut snack to the game. Luckily, the reaction didn't turn fatal, but it did leave a lasting impression on Gregg.



### Recognizing the Warning Signs

The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) recommends following the "3 Rs" for treating anaphylaxis:

1. **Recognize the symptoms.** Symptoms may begin in as little as five minutes to up to two hours after exposure to the allergen, but life-threatening reactions may progress over hours. Some symptoms that an anaphylactic reaction may be occurring include:

- Tingling sensation, itching or metallic taste in the mouth
- Hives
- Sensation of warmth
- Asthma symptoms
- Swelling of the mouth and throat
- Difficulty breathing
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Cramping
- Drop in blood pressure
- Loss of consciousness

2. **React quickly.** If you suspect an anaphylactic reaction is occurring, don't lose precious time:

- Dial 911 immediately!
- Look for a medical emergency bracelet or necklace.
- Administer an EpiPen.
- Get to a hospital as soon as possible and plan to stay at least 4-6 hours in case symptoms return.

3. **Review what happened and be sure to prevent it from recurring.** Find out how the offending food was introduced into the environment and take steps to make sure that it doesn't happen again.

### Peanut-Free Schools

It wasn't until two years after that fateful soccer game that Gregg Durski decided to learn more about food allergy. When Gregg's son's daycare center, Gretchen's House in Ann Arbor, declared itself "peanut-free," he and his wife were upset that their child's lifestyle would have to change.

"I thought, 'Why should you punish 200 kids just because one kid has a food allergy?'" Gregg said, "but then I realized that you shouldn't make that

one kid suffer, just like you wouldn't make a kid in a wheelchair suffer by not putting in a ramp."

Gretchen Preston, director of Gretchen's House explained that "most of the parents were very supportive of our decision to become peanut-free. There was some resistance from a few at first, but once they understood the seriousness of the situation, they appreciated our position."

The "situation" is the enrollment of a child with severe peanut allergies. School administrators sent notices to parents explaining that peanut products posed a life-threatening risk to this child and that the school would no longer include them with school lunches and snacks.

"The safety of the children in our school comes first. We provide lunches here for the children, and by planning a menu typically consisting of fresh foods — mostly fruits and vegetables — we're able to offer a safe environment for all of the children," she said. "We could offer just peanut-free tables or eating areas, but we don't want to isolate the children with allergies. In these times, we are trying to be inclusive. This is part of making children feel welcomed and accepted."

That safe environment also includes providing an hour-and-a-half training session on food allergies to childcare

workers at Gretchen's House. Caretakers are taught how to administer an EpiPen and what to do in case of an emergency.

But what happens when a food-allergic child becomes school age? Ann Arbor Public Schools has created a task force to explore the impacts of going peanut-free. Not only will this task force examine alternatives to the cafeteria menu, but it will also consider recommending policies that minimize the risk of exposure within other environments such as school buses, gymnasiums, class trips, etc. The district hopes to present an action plan by 2003.

Making food-allergic children feel safe also requires the participation and cooperation of other parents. Small lifestyle changes, such as finding peanut-free products, can help reduce the risk.

### Food Substitutes for Safety

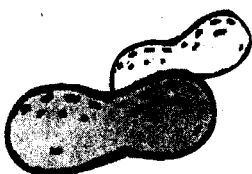
Avoidance is the only surefire way to prevent an allergic reaction, so finding a peanut alternative is a critical task in food preparation.

When Tyler Willis' mom Debbie, searched the web for peanut butter alternatives, she discovered some interesting information. The good news — there were more "peanut-free" products out there than she'd expected. The bad news — some "peanut-free" products are made on the same production lines used to make peanut-based ones.

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## Food Allergy Facts

- ✓ Approximately 2.5 million children in the United States suffer from food allergies.
- ✓ Allergies are typically identified between 6-16 months of age.
- ✓ Less than 10 percent of children with peanut allergies will outgrow them.
- ✓ 70-80 percent of children with other allergies (milk and egg) will outgrow them.



- ✓ Peanuts and shellfish are the most common form of anaphylactic food allergy.
- ✓ At the present time, there is no cure for food allergy. Avoidance is the only way.

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Even trace amounts of peanuts may trigger an anaphylactic reaction, so Debbie recognized the importance of selecting a substitute that was not only labeled "peanut-free," but was also produced in a peanut-free factory. I.M. Healthy™ SoyNut Butter is one such product.

But does soynut butter taste anything like peanut butter? According to Curt Roettig, co-producer, "If you put soynut butter in front of 100 kids, probably 98-99 of them wouldn't know the difference and would love it."

Gregg Durksi's kids agreed; they liked Soynut butter so well that the Durksi family has totally eliminated peanut butter from their household.

## Food for Thought

With activities like camp, birthday parties, holidays, traveling, etc., a part of every child's life, how can you care for a child with food allergies? By planning ahead and staying informed.

Delia Troy, another mommy in the

Jammin' Java playgroup said, "We make sure that everything we bring is 'Tyler-friendly.' I only bring juice and water, and I double-check the ingredients of the food I pack. If I'm not sure if something is safe, I'll call Debbie first before I bring it."

By sharing detailed information about Tyler's allergies with other caretakers, Debbie was able to help other parents feel confident about taking care of Tyler, and provide herself with some peace of mind. "It's impossible to control the kids from picking up each other's things. It's almost like a magnet the way they immediately pick up each other's cups and start drinking. It'd be impossible for me to stop them, and Tyler would be a very unhappy baby," Debbie explained.

When preparing food for an event that includes a food-allergic child:

- Designate a group of pots, pans and utensils specifically for the preparation of the allergy-free meals.
- Enlist the support of both adults and

playmates to help keep a designated area allergy-free throughout the meal.

- Avoid dishes with sauces or condiments that may contain hidden allergens.
- Avoid Asian, Thai, Vietnamese, Mexican or African foods if the guest is allergic to peanut or tree nuts. These cuisines typically use nuts as ingredients.
- Stress to guests that food allergy is serious and that a reaction can be fatal.
- Choose simply prepared foods such as baked potatoes, steamed vegetables or broiled meat.

Yes, eating a peanut can be a matter of life or death for children with severe food allergies. But with enough education and "Tyler-friendly" planning, a trip to Jammin' Java — or any other event — can be fun and safe for everyone. ■

— Julie Sheridan of Washington D. C., is a freelance writer and aunt to Tyler Willis.

## Books & Videos

Call FAAN at (800) 921-2222

- *How to Read a Label: The Nut-Free Diet*
- *Caring for the Child with Food Allergies* by Lisa C. C. C.
- *The Parent's Guide to Food Allergies* by Marianne Barber
- *Food Allergy News Columns Volumes I and II*
- *What's to Eat? The Milk-Free, Nut-Free Food Allergy Cookbook*
- *Video: Alexander, the Who Couldn't Eat Peanuts*

## Websites

- American Academy of Pediatrics [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- American Academy of Allergy and Immunology [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org)
- The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)

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