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Food Allergies and Your Child

Louise Moore
University of Kentucky

Jackie Walters
University of Kentucky, jackie.walters@uky.edu

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Food Allergies and Your Child

Food Allergies

Jenny has enjoyed her morning snack. But 30 minutes later, she is cranky. Her eyes look swollen, and she is crying. Does Jenny have allergies, or is she being fussy?

Food allergies are:

A reaction to food that is not normal. The body's immune system gets confused. Sometimes the reaction occurs within minutes, and sometimes it takes up to two hours. The following symptoms may be a result of food allergies:

- Sneezing, runny nose, coughing, difficulty breathing, wheezing (asthma)
- Itchy skin or eyes, rash or swelling
- Nausea, diarrhea, gas, pain, cramps

Most allergic reactions are just uncomfortable. But a small percentage of people have severe reactions that can threaten their lives. Symptoms that seem like allergies may be other serious health problems.

If your child is having trouble breathing don't wait. Get them to a hospital or call 911 right away.

If you suspect a food allergy

Have your child checked by your health care provider. That is the only way to know if your child really has a food allergy. If they do, being under a doctor's care is very important.

There are some terms you might hear your doctor use when discussing food allergies with you:

- **Allergen:** any substance that causes an allergic reaction
- **Casein:** a protein found in milk
- **Gluten:** a protein combination found in some cereals, especially wheat

Common Food Allergies

For children: peanuts, milk, tree nuts (such as pecans, almonds, cashews, walnuts), soy and wheat

For adults: peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish (especially shrimp)

About one out of 20 children is allergic to at least one food. But, there is good news. Except for allergies to nuts and tree nuts, most children outgrow their food allergies.

Handling Food Allergies

- **Get Help!** Ask your doctor or health care provider how to handle the allergies.
- **Avoid offering problem foods.** Check ingredients in foods to make sure the allergen is not present.
- **Find out about food substitutes.** Provide other foods with the nutrients your child would miss.
- **Read the labels.** Read the ingredients list to make sure packaged food does not contain the problem ingredient.
- **Tell all caregivers.** Tell the day care center, babysitters, grandparents, other relatives and friends. Explain what foods to avoid and why.
- **Take food from home.** If you are not sure about the food at the day care center or restaurants, pack food for your child.
- **Talk with your child.** Practice what to do when someone who does not know about the allergy offers the problem food.

Adapted from USDA "Nibbles for Health" Leader Guide, by Louise Moore, MS, Area Extension Specialist, June 2006.

Revised by Jackie Walters, MBA, RD, LD, Extension Specialist for Nutrition Education Programs, August, 2008

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