

# Food Allergy Basics for All Ages

This handout provides general information and tips for managing food allergies. Speak with your child's allergist if you have questions or before making changes to your child's food allergy management plan.

**There is a lot of new information to learn when your child is diagnosed with a food allergy. It is normal for parents to feel overwhelmed at times. This handout was designed to be a resource you can refer back to over time. You can also read the Food Allergy Stages handout for your child's age for specific tips for managing food allergies at their stage of development. As you learn more about food allergy management, you will feel more confident and develop routines that work for your family!**



## Definitions

**Allergen:** An allergen is something (usually a protein) that causes an allergic reaction, such as something in food or the environment. For someone with a food allergy to peanut, peanut is an allergen.

**Allergic reaction:** Symptoms of an allergic reaction usually happen between a few minutes and two hours after exposure to a food. The most common symptoms involve the skin (e.g., hives, redness, or itching), respiratory symptoms (e.g., trouble breathing, hoarse voice, or wheezing), and gastrointestinal or gut symptoms (e.g., vomiting or diarrhea). Symptoms can occur by themselves or in combination, such as skin rash and trouble breathing. Reactions can range from mild to severe and symptoms can be different each time.

**Anaphylaxis:** Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that can be life threatening, with symptoms such as difficulty breathing or feeling dizzy and passing out. Any time two body systems are involved, for example the skin (hives) and gut (vomiting), that is also anaphylaxis.

**Epinephrine:** Epinephrine is a safe medicine that works quickly to stop an allergic reaction, including anaphylaxis.

**Epinephrine auto-injector:** An auto-injector is the device used to treat anaphylaxis by giving a dose of epinephrine into the thigh muscle. Generics and several brands are available, such as EpiPen®, Auvi-Q®, and Adrenaclick®. Symjepi™ also gives a dose of epinephrine, but uses a pre-filled syringe instead of an auto-injector.

**Anaphylaxis Action Plan:** The Anaphylaxis Action Plan (sometimes called the Emergency Care Plan or Food Allergy Action Plan) is a document developed with your child's allergist. The plan lists your child's food allergies and gives important information about symptoms of an allergic reaction, how to treat a reaction, and how to get emergency help.

**Cross-contact:** Cross-contact can happen when a food allergen accidentally touches safe food. For example, slicing an apple on a cutting board after slicing cheese (without cleaning it first) could pose a risk of cross-contact for someone with an allergy to milk.

# Food Allergy Stages: Food Allergy Basics for All Ages

## Allergen Exposure

- It is important to understand different ways that you can come into contact with food allergens so you can take steps to avoid them.
- Ingestion (by mouth): Eating food containing an allergen is the type of exposure most likely to cause anaphylaxis.
- Inhalation (breathing in the allergen): Just smelling the food or being near it does not cause an allergic reaction. In rare cases, allergic reactions can happen if the allergen is inhaled. This occurs only in specific situations when proteins can enter the air, usually by cooking (e.g., child is close by when you are steaming fish). These allergic reactions are usually mild. Talk with your allergist if this happens to your child, so that you can make a plan to avoid these situations.
- Skin contact (by touch): If a food allergen gets on your child's skin, this could cause hives or other skin symptoms. Wash off the allergen with soap and water so it will not accidentally get into the child's mouth, nose, or eyes. Hand washing before and after eating helps to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction.



## Label Reading

- You cannot tell what is in a food just by looking at it. Ingredient labels allow you to identify food allergens and avoid them.
- Read ingredient labels every time because ingredients can change.
- If you do not know if a food is safe, avoid it or call the company to find out if it contains a food allergen.
- When you build the habit of carefully reading ingredient labels, children learn this is an important part of their daily routine.



## Recognizing and Treating an Allergic Reaction

- Make sure you understand your child's Anaphylaxis Action Plan. It is important to be able to recognize signs of an allergic reaction, so that you can treat it early. Check in with your child's allergist if you have any questions.
- Use your child's epinephrine auto-injector to treat anaphylaxis. Remember that epinephrine is a safe medicine. If you are not sure whether or not your child needs epinephrine, there is no harm in giving it.
- Call 911 for transportation to the nearest emergency room for anaphylaxis. Your child will be monitored in case they need additional treatment.
- Learn how to use your child's brand of epinephrine auto-injector or other device to administer epinephrine (e.g., pre-filled syringe). The devices are similar, but there are differences in how you administer them that are important in an emergency. Visit the website for your child's device to read instructions. Most brands also have online training videos.
- Practice with an epinephrine auto-injector training device in advance so that you will feel confident in an emergency. The training device looks like the real auto-injector but does not have a needle or medication in it.
- Keep your child's Anaphylaxis Action Plan and epinephrine auto-injector with them at all times, even if they will not be eating.

## Managing Food Allergies at Home

- Your family will decide whether to keep your child's allergens in your home. This may depend on your child's age, how common the allergen is in food items, and dietary needs of other family members.
- Set family rules, such as:
  - No sharing food, drinks, dishware, cups, or utensils.
  - Hand-washing before and after eating.
  - Eating is only allowed in specific areas of the home (e.g., kitchen, dining table).
- Keep a copy of the Anaphylaxis Action Plan clearly posted (e.g., on the refrigerator).
- Make sure everyone knows where epinephrine auto-injectors are stored in the house.

### TO AVOID CROSS-CONTACT AT HOME:

- Wash your hands before preparing and feeding food to your child.
- Use separate serving utensils for foods with and without allergens.
- Clean counters and table tops with soap and water or commercial cleaners.
- Use clean cutting boards, pots/pans, and utensils to prepare your child's food.
- Clean cooking surfaces such as microwaves, toaster ovens, and grills, or use foil or a grill pan for ovens/grills.
- Store food containing allergens away from safe food to avoid spills and confusion.

## Eating Out at Restaurants

- Eating out can be a positive experience with advanced planning. Visit the restaurant's website to see the menu and allergy policy or call ahead and speak with the manager.
- Visit new restaurants at off-peak hours to allow enough time for questions.
- Bring safe food with you when possible to ensure a safe option.
- Bring wipes to clean surfaces if needed (e.g., table, chairs/high chairs/boosters).
- Always have your child's epinephrine auto-injector. Do not eat without it.
- Tell restaurant staff that your child has a food allergy. Speak with someone in charge like the manager or chef, in addition to the server. Be clear this is not just being picky.
- Ask how food is prepared. Inform staff about cross-contact risks and hidden ingredients. Give examples for your child's allergens (e.g., cooking fries in the same oil as fish is a cross-contact risk for someone with an allergy to fish).
- Consider carrying a "chef card" that lists your child's allergens.
- It is okay to ask for a new dish if there is a mistake or to leave if you don't think the restaurant can prepare food that is safe for your child.



## Educating Other Caregivers

- Food allergies may be new to many people. Plan to teach other caregivers in advance to make the experience safe and positive for everyone. Make sure to leave time for questions.
- Make sure that all people caring for your child understand how to read an ingredient label and safely prepare/serve food to avoid cross-contact. Consider preparing your child's food ahead of time.
- Review your child's Anaphylaxis Action Plan with the caregiver. Make sure they can recognize an allergic reaction and have them practice with an epinephrine auto-injector trainer.
- Make sure caregivers have your contact information and can call 911 in an emergency.
- Be clear that everyone caring for your child needs to follow their food allergy management plan. "Food allergies are serious, because eating even a little bit of the food can make my child very sick. The good news is that the plan our allergist gave us works very well. When we all follow the same plan, it helps keep her safe and makes her feel confident."



## Managing Food Allergies at Childcare and School

- Before your child starts childcare/school each year, schedule a meeting with staff to learn about their food allergy management policies and discuss your child's needs.
- Provide the childcare/school with your child's Anaphylaxis Action Plan and epinephrine auto-injectors. Make sure staff know how to recognize and treat an allergic reaction.
- Identify where emergency medication will be stored (e.g., director's office, nurse's office, classroom) and who will be allowed to administer medication.
- If your child will be eating food provided by the childcare/school, find out how to review the menu and read ingredient labels ahead of time. Make sure staff know how to read labels.
- Find out if there is a designated table for children with food allergies in the classroom/lunchroom.
- Consider whether the classroom can be allergen-free. If food is eaten in the classroom, recommend hand-washing with soap and water or wipes after meals/snacks.
- Make sure your child can wash their hands before eating.
- Recommend a "no sharing food" policy.
- Clearly label your child's food and water bottles/bottles/sippy cups.
- Avoid use of food in art projects, science experiments, and rewards/incentives.
- Recommend non-food treats for celebrations (e.g., special prize for the birthday child).
- Plan for field trips (e.g., availability of safe food, who will carry/administer medication).
- If your child takes the bus, request a no eating food policy and make a plan for emergencies.

## Navigating Social Activities

- Children with food allergies can be involved in social activities! Some activities may require advanced planning to ensure that your child has safe foods to eat and that there is a plan to recognize and treat allergic reactions.
- Bring safe food with you or time activities so that they can be food-free.
- Always bring your child's epinephrine auto-injector, even if your child will not be eating.
- Host activities in your home or a place that does not have food (e.g., a playground) when possible to make things easier and safer.
- When others are hosting, talk to the host about your child's food allergies ahead of time. Find out whether the food that is served will be safe for your child.
- Freeze a supply of safe treats to have available for birthday parties and celebrations.
- If you will be leaving your child with other adults (e.g., drop-off party or play date), follow guidelines for Educating Other Caregivers.
- Consider having your child wear medical identification jewelry listing their food allergies.

## Managing Your Stress and Anxiety and Feeling Confident

- It is common for parents to experience stress or worry when their child is diagnosed with a food allergy. Remember that the routines you follow to manage food allergies work well.
- Ask your child's allergist when you have questions about your child's food allergies. Having the facts will help you feel more confident and keep your child safe.
- Support groups led by professionals who work with children with food allergies (e.g. nurse, allergist, nutritionist, mental health provider) can help reduce stress/anxiety.
- Talk to your child's allergist or your own doctor if you are having a hard time managing stress or worries about your child's allergies. Mental health professionals can help parents cope with stress and anxiety related to a child's medical condition.

The following Food Allergy Stages handouts provide specific recommendations and tips for managing food allergies at different ages:

**Baby** (0-12 months)  
**Toddler** (1-3 years)  
**Preschool** (3-5 years)  
**Early Grade School** (5-8 years)

**Late Grade School** (8-11 years)  
**Early Teen** (11-14 years)  
**Late Teen** (14-18 years)  
**Young Adult** (18-21 years)

## Resources for Further Information

Please note that website links may change. (Links last accessed 7/8/2022)

### PROFESSIONAL AND PATIENT SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

- American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI) [www.aaaai.org](http://www.aaaai.org)
- American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (ACAAI) [www.acaai.org](http://www.acaai.org)
- Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA) [www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)
- Food Allergy Research and Education (FARE) [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)
- Kids with Food Allergies (KFA) [www.kidswithfoodallergies.org](http://www.kidswithfoodallergies.org)
- American Partnership for Eosinophilic Disorders (APFED) [www.apfed.org](http://www.apfed.org)
- The FPIES Foundation [www.fpiesfoundation.org](http://www.fpiesfoundation.org)
- International FPIES Association (I-FPIES) [www.fpies.org](http://www.fpies.org)

### LABEL READING

- Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 Questions and Answers [www.fda.gov/food/food-allergens/gluten-free-guidance-documents-regulatory-information/food-allergen-labeling-and-consumer-protection-act-2004-questions-and-answers](http://www.fda.gov/food/food-allergens/gluten-free-guidance-documents-regulatory-information/food-allergen-labeling-and-consumer-protection-act-2004-questions-and-answers)

### RECOGNIZING AND TREATING ALLERGIC REACTIONS

- Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Food Allergy in the United States: Summary for Patients, Families, and Caregivers [www.niaid.nih.gov/sites/default/files/faguidelinespatient.pdf](http://www.niaid.nih.gov/sites/default/files/faguidelinespatient.pdf)
- AAAAI Anaphylaxis Emergency Action Plan <https://www.aaaai.org/Aaaai/media/Media-Library-PDFs/Tools%20for%20the%20Public/Allergy,%20Asthma,%20Immunology%20Glossary/Anaphylaxis-Emergency-Action-Plan.pdf>
- AAAAI Anaphylaxis Overview, Symptoms, Treatment and Management, articles and quiz <https://www.aaaai.org/Conditions-Treatments/Allergies/Anaphylaxis>
- AAAAI Food Allergy Overview, Symptoms, Treatment and Management, articles and quiz <https://www.aaaai.org/Conditions-Treatments/Allergies/Food-Allergy>

### MANAGING FOOD ALLERGIES IN CHILD CARE AND SCHOOL

- CDC Voluntary Guidelines for Managing Food Allergies in Schools and Early Care and Education Program [www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/foodallergies/pdf/20\\_316712-A\\_FA\\_guide\\_508tag.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/foodallergies/pdf/20_316712-A_FA_guide_508tag.pdf)
- AAAAI School Tools <https://www.aaaai.org/Tools-for-the-Public/School-Tools>

### OTHER EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

- Jaffe Food Allergy Institute video on Diagnosing and Avoiding Food Allergens [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAW6Oo8k\\_b8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAW6Oo8k_b8)
- Jaffe Food Allergy Institute video on Recognizing and Treating Anaphylaxis [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCKSUzZHmq8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCKSUzZHmq8)
- Allergy Ready [www.allergyready.com](http://www.allergyready.com)
- Living Confidently with Food Allergy: A Guide for Parents and Families [www.allergyhome.org/handbook/](http://www.allergyhome.org/handbook/)

### FOOD ASSISTANCE AND OTHER REDUCED COST PROGRAMS

- [www.findhelp.org](http://www.findhelp.org)
- [www.211.org](http://www.211.org)
- [www.foodequalityinitiative.org](http://www.foodequalityinitiative.org)