

Toddler (1–3 years)

The Food Allergy Stages handouts were designed to help families manage food allergies at different developmental stages.

- Use the *Food Allergy Basics for All Ages* handout to learn about important information all parents should know when they have a child with food allergies.
- Always speak with your child’s allergist if you have questions or before making changes to your child’s food allergy management plan.



Toddlers are active, curious, and need careful monitoring. They pay attention to what adults do and learn by imitation and play. When you follow consistent food allergy management routines, children will learn this is an important part of daily life.

Teaching Children about Food Allergy

- Your toddler will pick up on your cues about coping with food allergy. When your words and behaviors show you are confident, this will help your child feel more confident too.
- Toddlers can start to understand simple rules and routines, such as washing hands before and after eating. However, they cannot yet be expected to follow rules on their own.
- When teaching your child about food allergies, speak with them in the same way that you talk about other safety issues, like looking both ways before crossing the street. Use a calm tone and focus on safety routines.
- Use simple terms like “safe”/“not safe” or “milk can make you sick.”
- As your child’s vocabulary starts to grow, you can teach them the names of their food allergens. You can also teach them using photos, pictures, or toy food.

Allergen Exposure

- Toddlers put their hands and objects in their mouths. Allergens can get into the mouth this way. You can reduce the risk of an allergic reaction by:
 - Keeping food containing allergens out of reach (including siblings’ cups or bottles).
 - Washing your child’s hands with soap and water or wipes before and after eating.
- Teach your child about washing hands before and after eating. Use a song to make it fun and model how long to wash (e.g., sing “Happy Birthday” twice).

Label Reading

- Explain routines out loud so that children will learn they are important. “We read the label, so we know there are no eggs in these cookies. They are safe for you to eat.”

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Recognizing and Treating an Allergic Reaction

- Be aware that sudden changes in behavior can be signs of an allergic reaction. These can include crankiness, crying that can't be soothed, tiredness or sleepiness beyond what is expected or routine, lack of interest in playing, or clinginess.
- Toddlers may use different words to describe symptoms, such as “a funny feeling in my mouth,” that food tastes “spicy,” or that their mouth feels “hot” or like there is something “stuck” in it.

Managing Food Allergies at Home

- Start to teach rules such as only eating food served by a caregiver.
- Make sure that older siblings understand important rules, such as not sharing food and washing hands before and after they eat.
- Store allergens out of reach of curious hands.
- Vacuum and clean floors regularly, as young children may find food on the ground.
- Consider allergen-free pet food and treats, as toddlers may put these in their mouths.
- Keep epinephrine auto-injectors out of reach of young children.
- Explain routines out loud. “We have our medicine bag, so now we can go to the park!”

Eating Out at Restaurants

- Bring wipes to clean eating surfaces and high chairs/boosters to get rid of allergens.
- Include older toddlers in communicating at restaurants. You can practice ahead of time through play. “I have food allergies.”

Managing Food Allergies at Childcare and School

- If the childcare/school will be providing some or all of your child's food, ask to read ingredient labels ahead of time and find out whether there are menu alternatives for your child.
- Make sure staff know how to read ingredient labels for your child's allergies.
- Provide a supply of ready-to-eat snacks for your child in case extra food is needed.
- Find out how staff monitor meals. Make sure your child cannot grab other children's food.
- Remind staff to wash their own hands before and after feeding children or eating their own meals.
- Be aware of allergens in some art projects, sensory tables, Play-Doh, and paint.
- Send in a children's book about food allergies for the teacher to read at story time.



Navigating Social Activities

- Make sure that other adults and children know they should not offer food to your child.
- Provide close supervision on playgrounds and other social settings where your child may grab food or well-meaning strangers may offer food.
- Carry wipes to clean surfaces and hand wipes if soap and water will not be available.
- Teach children not to share food. You can practice language with older toddlers directly or through play. “No, thank you,” or “I have allergies.”
- Consider having your child wear a medical identification bracelet. Prompt your child to show it to other children and adults. This builds the habit of teaching others about their food allergies. There are colorful plastic options that are well-liked by younger children.

Supporting Children’s Self-Esteem

- Help older toddlers label feelings. “It seems like you are mad you can’t eat what your brother is eating. Let’s find a food you enjoy that is safe for you.”
- Read children’s books about food allergy to show that other children have allergies too.
- Give simple choices to increase your child’s sense of control. “Daddy brought snacks to the park. Would you like the crackers or the fruit?”
- Praise your child for following routines. “Great job washing your hands before you eat!”



Preparing Children for Medical Visits

- Even young children will take cues from parents on how to react in new or stressful situations. When you are positive and calm, this provides comfort to your child.
- Older toddlers (close to 3 years) can be told about a medical visit the same day. They may benefit from medical play in the days prior to the visit (e.g., parents and children examining dolls and stuffed animals using a toy medical kit).
- Use distraction and soothing strategies to help with medical procedures such as skin tests, blood tests, and food challenges. Examples include watching a favorite video, reading a book, blowing bubbles or a pinwheel, or hugging a blanket or stuffed toy.

See the **Food Allergy Stages Preschool** handout for questions about managing food allergies as your toddler gets older.