

Late Teen (14–18 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.



In the teen years, the responsibility for food allergy management gradually shifts from the parent to the child. You can help prepare your teen for this transition. Teens do best when they understand their management plan and have continued family support.

Teaching Teens about Food Allergy

- Empower your teen with the message that food allergies are manageable. "Allergic reactions can be serious, but the steps you take to manage your food allergies work well to keep you safe and let you do the things you enjoy."
- Teens want more independence from parents, but they are still developing problem-solving and organizational skills. Help your teen plan ahead for steps they will take to manage food allergies when you are not there.
- As your teen starts to manage food allergies more independently, check in with them regularly about how things are going. Talk about who will be responsible for different management tasks so nothing gets forgotten.
- Let your teen know they can always come to you with questions or tell you if they think they made a "mistake." When you keep the lines of communication open, this is an opportunity to build problem-solving skills.



Allergen Exposure

- Make sure your teen understands the different ways to come into contact with an allergen. Eating the food causes the greatest risk for anaphylaxis.
- Teach your child that just being near or smelling an allergen does not cause a reaction. (e.g., smelling a peanut butter sandwich cannot cause an allergic reaction). In rare cases, allergic reactions can occur from breathing in the allergen. This only happens in very specific situations, usually during cooking (e.g., steaming fish). These reactions are usually mild.
- If allergen gets on their skin, this could cause hives or other skin symptoms. They should wash off the allergen with soap and water.
- Reinforce routines such as hand-washing before eating and not sharing food.

Label Reading

- As your teen spends more time on their own, it is important that they know how to read ingredient labels.
- Practice label reading with your teen at home and at the grocery store.
- Teach your teen the rules you have developed with their allergist for avoiding foods with precautionary labeling (e.g., "may contain"). It is important to be clear and consistent.
- Teens can learn to call food companies if there are questions about whether a product is safe. Your teen can listen in when you call or make the call with you there to help.
- Remind your teen to read ingredient labels every time, because ingredients can change.
- Reinforce that if your teen cannot read a label, they should not eat the food.



Recognizing and Treating a Reaction

- Use your teen's Anaphylaxis Action Plan to teach about possible symptoms of a reaction. Make sure they understand how to recognize anaphylaxis and symptoms that should be treated with epinephrine.
- Make sure your teen knows how to self-administer epinephrine using their auto-injector. Practice regularly using a training device for the brand of auto-injector they carry. If you have expired auto-injectors you no longer need, consider having your teen practice on an orange or grapefruit.
- Talk about why your teen should have their auto-injector with them at all times. Epinephrine is a safe medicine that works well to stop allergic reactions. It works best when it is given soon after the reaction.
- Help your teen build the habit of bringing their epinephrine auto-injector with them whenever they leave the house (e.g., grab your coat and take your epinephrine auto-injector). Discuss plans for how they will feel comfortable carrying their medications (e.g., in a backpack, purse).
- Discuss your teen's emergency plan. If there won't be a supervising adult present, older teens can be given the independence to administer epinephrine to themselves.
- Make sure your teen knows how to call 911 for transportation to the emergency room for anaphylaxis.
- If your teen is nervous about the auto-injector, let them know that the needle it is short and skinny (about the length of a dime and shorter than needles for routine shots).

Managing Allergies at Home

- Make sure your teen understands how to avoid cross-contact.
- Involve your teen in meal planning, grocery shopping, and cooking to learn steps to prepare safe meals.
- Keep basic ingredients and safe ready-to-serve foods available so your teen can prepare meals independently.
- Make sure you and your teen have a plan for where epinephrine auto-injectors will be stored in the house.

Eating out at Restaurants

- It is important that your teen understand the steps involved in eating out safely.
- Visit restaurant websites together to practice thinking about safe options.
- Use role plays to practice communicating about allergies and asking about food preparation (including common examples of cross-contact and hidden ingredients for your teen's allergens).
- Let your child take the lead role in communicating with restaurant staff. You can provide support as needed.
- Make sure your teen always has their epinephrine auto-injector with them at the restaurant. Remind them that they should not eat without it.
- If your teen will be eating out with friends, consider calling or visiting the restaurant ahead of time with your teen so they will feel prepared.
- Help your child practice language to use when eating out with friends. "I always tell the restaurant about my food allergies. It's just my routine."
- Consider having your teen carry a "chef card" that lists their allergens.



Managing Allergies at School

- At this age, your teen can be part of your annual meeting with the school to discuss their food allergy management plan.
- Depending on school policies, your teen may be able to carry their epinephrine auto-injector with them. Talk to your teen about their comfort with self-carrying. Always have back-up medication stored in the nurse's office.
- Encourage your teen to communicate with cafeteria staff about their food allergies.
- Discuss where your teen feels most comfortable sitting for lunch and make sure that area is cleaned appropriately.
- Involve your teen in planning how to handle school events where food will be served.
- Check in with your teen about any teasing, bullying, or social exclusion related to food allergies. If there are concerns, talk to the adults in charge (e.g., schools, coaches).

Navigating Social Activities

- Partner with your teen to plan ahead for social events involving food. When they choose a plan that works for them, they will feel more confident and take fewer risks.
- If possible, check ahead of time what foods will be served at the event. Make sure your teen is comfortable communicating about their allergies and reading labels.
- Some teens may prefer to eat ahead of time or bring safe food from home.
- Your teen should always bring their epinephrine auto-injector, even if they will not be eating. Help your teen plan how to carry medication.
- Make sure friends know where your child keeps their auto-injector and what to do in an emergency. Consider helping your teen teach trusted friends how to use the epinephrine auto-injector.
- Talk openly with your teen about dating and kissing. Your teen should know that mouth kissing can transfer allergens. Discuss ways to reduce this risk. For example, no mouth kissing unless the partner knows about the food allergy and has avoided your child's allergens for at least several hours (eating an allergen-free meal can help too). At restaurants, suggest that the partner's meal also be allergen-free.
- Discuss the risks of drugs and alcohol. These can affect decision-making, such as not being as careful about avoiding allergens and making it harder to recognize and treat allergic reactions. Alcohol can contain allergens. It can also make food allergen proteins travel from your stomach to your bloodstream faster and undigested, so you might have a more severe reaction to a much smaller amount of the food.

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Supporting Self-Esteem

- Fitting in with peers is important for teens. Teens may worry about food allergies drawing attention or feel embarrassed to speak up about allergies in social situations.
- Encourage your teen to tell their friends about their allergies. When friends understand your child's routines, allergies are less likely to be a "big deal" and friends are more likely to choose activities that include your teen and help them stay safe.
- Role play language your teen can use in new or challenging situations, such as handling peer pressure to try a food, speaking up if a restaurant is not a safe choice, or talking to a partner about risks with kissing. This will help your teen feel prepared to speak up for themselves if needed.
- Let your teen know it's okay to feel frustrated, sad, or angry at times because of food allergies. Encourage your teen to come to you if they are feeling upset. Listen first without interrupting. Your child should know you understand their perspective.
- Let your teen know that you are proud of the safe choices they make.



Managing Anxiety and Feeling Confident

- As teens start to manage food allergies independently, they may worry about how to handle new situations, such as talking to romantic partners about food allergies or handling an allergic reaction.
- Encourage your teen to come to you with their questions or worries. Team up to plan for situations they feel worried about.
- Ask your teen's allergist to talk with your teen about the level of risk in different situations and how to stay safe without limiting daily activities.
- If your teen has a reaction, they may feel more worried afterwards. Reinforce good food allergy management routines and talk about parts of the emergency plan that worked well. "You did the right thing when you told your friends your throat was itchy," or "We learned how quickly the auto-injector can stop a reaction." This can also be an opportunity to talk about anything you will do differently to stay safe in the future.
- Talk with your teen's allergist or primary care provider if they are feeling anxious about food allergies. This could include worried thoughts, eating fewer foods (even if the food is safe), avoiding social activities when food is present or needing more reassurance that food is safe. Mental health professionals can help teens cope with anxiety related to food allergies.

Preparing Children for Medical Visits

- Talk to your teen ahead of time about the reason for their allergy visit and any procedures they may have. Give them a chance to share their feelings and ask questions.
- If your teen is worried about the appointment, plan coping strategies ahead of time. For skin testing, plan activities to keep busy (e.g., games on a phone or tablet, sketching, or reading). For procedures like blood testing, consider coping strategies such as distraction (e.g., watching a video, counting backwards) or a relaxation technique such as breathing.
- Prepare your teen for playing a bigger role in allergy appointments. Ask them to think about questions to ask their allergist. It may help to keep a list.
- Allow teens to have one-on-one time with their allergist to talk about topics such as kissing or drugs and alcohol.
- After the appointment, talk with your teen about what they learned.
- Some allergists specialize in working with children and teenagers. Talk with your child's allergist to find out if and when they will need to switch to an adult allergist. You can ask your current allergist for help in this process. You can also use the following resource: <https://allergist.aaaai.org/find>

See the **Food Allergy Stages Young Adult** handout for questions about managing food allergies away from home as your teen gets older.