

# Young Adults (18–21 years)

The Food Allergy Stages handouts were designed to help patients and families manage food allergies at different developmental stages. Always speak with your allergist if you have questions or before making changes to your food allergy management plan.

**Young adults should be ready to take the primary responsibility for day-to-day food allergy management. They do best with continued family support during this transition.**



## Preparing to Take Responsibility for Food Allergy Management

- Keep in mind that you have already worked hard to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence to manage food allergies in daily life. Now you will be thinking about how to use these skills in new situations, such as at college or in the workplace.
- Family, friends, and roommates can be a great support team. Your allergist will also be a good partner as you plan for these transitions.
- Check in with your support team from time to time about how things are going and to ask questions, especially when there are changes in routine.
- Over time, you will feel more confident making decisions and advocating for yourself about food allergy management.

## 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., a person with fish allergy is near steaming fish). These allergic reactions are usually mild. Talk with your allergist if this happens to you, so that you can make a plan to avoid these situations.
- Skin contact (by touch): If a food allergen gets on your skin, this could cause hives or other skin symptoms. Wash off the allergen with soap and water so it will not accidentally get into your mouth, nose, or eyes. Hand washing before and after eating helps to reduce the risk of an allergic reaction.



## Label Reading

- Make sure you know how to read ingredient labels for your food allergens, including precautionary labeling (e.g., “may contain”).
- Make sure you know how to call food companies if there are questions about whether a product is safe. If this is a new skill for you, you can listen in when a family member calls.
- Remember to read ingredient labels every time, because ingredients can change.

## Managing Food Allergies at Home

- Make sure you know the steps to avoid cross-contact in your living space, whether that is your family’s home, a dorm room, or an apartment.
- Talk with your support team about strategies for meal planning and grocery shopping to ensure you have safe meal options available. It helps to have ready-to-serve foods available for times you may be too busy to cook or go to the college dining facility.
- Talk with roommates and friends about your food allergies, including steps they can take to create a safe living space and issues that arise when cooking and eating together.
- Roommates should know where you keep your epinephrine auto-injectors and how to use them in case you are unable to self-administer.

## Recognizing and Treating an Allergic Reaction

- Make sure you understand your Anaphylaxis Action Plan. Review the possible symptoms of a reaction, including symptoms that should be treated with epinephrine.
- Make sure you know how to self-administer epinephrine using your auto-injector. Visit the website for your device to read instructions. Most brands also have online training videos.
- Practice regularly using a training device for the brand of epinephrine auto-injector you carry. You can also use expired auto-injectors that are no longer needed to practice on an orange or grapefruit.
- Review how to call 911 for transportation to the emergency room for serious reactions.
- Remember the facts about epinephrine. Epinephrine is a safe medicine that works well to stop allergic reactions. It works best when it is given soon after the reaction. That is why you should carry your epinephrine auto-injector with you at all times, even if you do not plan on eating.
- Make a plan for how you will carry your epinephrine auto-injector with you.
- If you are nervous about the epinephrine auto-injector, keep in mind that the needle is short and skinny (about the length of a dime and shorter than needles for routine shots).

## Eating Out at Restaurants

- Make sure you feel confident telling restaurant staff about your food allergies, asking how food is prepared, and explaining cross-contact and hidden ingredients.
- If you need practice with these skills, visit restaurant websites and practice ways to communicate about food allergies with a member of your support team.
- Make sure you always have your epinephrine auto-injector with you at the restaurant. You should not eat without it.
- If you will be eating out somewhere new, look at the restaurant website and call ahead of time to ask questions so you will feel prepared.
- Consider carrying a “chef card” that lists your allergens.
- Remember that 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 you.



## Managing Food Allergies at College

- If you are applying to colleges, talk with schools ahead of time about their food allergy management policies. On campus tours, visit the dining halls to see how food allergy is managed.
- Talk to someone at the disability services office at your college about your food allergies. Disability services can help coordinate your food allergy management plan with housing, dining, and health services.
- Find out how food is prepared in dining halls, how students can access allergen information, and what special meal options may be available for students with food allergies. Also ask about emergency plans in dining facilities.
- Find out what housing options and choices for roommate assignments are available. Consider whether a single dorm room or living with a roommate makes the most sense for you.
- Find out whether you can have a private mini-refrigerator or microwave to store and prepare safe foods. Consider whether a kitchen is necessary for meal preparation.
- Find out whether your resident advisor (RA) will be trained on managing food allergies. Make sure you speak with your RA and roommates about how to keep your living space safe and what to do in an emergency.

## Navigating Social Activities

- Make sure to communicate about your food allergies and read ingredient labels at social events. Think about plans to handle situations when there may not be a safe option available, such as eating ahead of time or bringing your own food.
- Research allergy-friendly restaurants ahead of time so you can suggest good options for hanging out with friends or for work celebrations.
- Tell friends and romantic partners about your food allergies and the importance of avoiding allergens. Teach them where you keep your epinephrine auto-injector and what to do in an emergency. This includes teaching friends and romantic partners how to use the auto-injector if you are unable to administer it yourself.
- Be aware that mouth kissing can transfer allergens. There are ways to reduce this risk. For example, no mouth kissing unless the partner knows about the food allergy and has avoided your allergens for at least several hours (eating an allergen-free meal can help too). At restaurants, suggest that your partner's meal also be allergen-free.
- Know 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.

## Supporting Self-Esteem

- Build a support network by talking to friends about your food allergies. When friends understand your routines, allergies are less likely to be a "big deal" and friends will be more likely to choose inclusive activities.
- If you attend college, check with the school to find out if there is a support group or organization for students with food allergies.
- Plan ahead about how to speak up for yourself in new or challenging situations. Examples might include handling peer pressure to try an alcoholic drink at a party, letting friends know that a restaurant is not a safe choice for you, talking to work supervisor about ways to avoid cross-contact in a shared kitchen, or talking to a partner about risks with kissing. Your support team and allergist can help come up with ideas.
- It's normal to feel frustrated, down, or angry at times because of food allergies. Reach out to a member of your support team when you are feeling upset or just need to talk about it.





## Managing Anxiety and Feeling Confident

- Managing food allergies independently can be stressful at times. Once you develop routines, you will feel more confident and in control.
- Reach out to your family or other members of your support team with questions or worries. You can collaborate with them to plan for situations you feel worried about.
- Your allergist can answer questions about the level of risk in different situations and good strategies to stay safe without limiting daily activities.
- If you have an allergic reaction, it is common to feel more worried afterwards. Think about parts of your emergency plan that worked well (e.g., “The epinephrine auto-injector stopped the reaction quickly.”). This can also be an opportunity to think about anything you can do differently to stay safe in the future.
- Talk with your allergist or primary care provider if you are feeling anxious or down about food allergies. This could include worried thoughts, avoiding safe foods due to worry, or feeling uncomfortable in social activities when food is present. Mental health professionals can help young adults cope with stress related to food allergies.

## Preparing to Manage Your Healthcare

- Talk with your family, allergist, and primary care provider about skills you will need to take a lead role in your healthcare. This may include scheduling medical appointments, filling prescriptions, understanding insurance coverage and copayments, and contacting your allergist with questions.
- Prepare for appointments with your allergist by thinking about questions ahead of time. It may help to keep a list.
- Consider attending appointments with your allergist independently, or make sure to have one-on-one time with the allergist during the appointment to talk about topics such as kissing or drugs and alcohol.
- Think about strategies to remember to refill prescriptions before they run out or expire. It may help to keep reminders on your phone.
- If you are living away from home, find out the location of the nearest hospital or medical facility, in case of an emergency.
- Some allergists specialize in working with children and teenagers. Talk with your allergist about whether or not you will need to switch to an adult allergist. If you will need to find a new allergist because of your age or location, ask your current allergist for help in this process. You can also use the following resource: <https://allergist.aaaai.org/find>

