

Food allergies and disordered eating among children and adolescents

From the moment your child is diagnosed with food allergies, a million questions flood your mind. Will they outgrow this? How will it change their lives? How do you instil the appropriate amount of caution and not cause excessive fear?

Dr Brett Greenberger and Emily Greenberger answer these important questions.

Having food allergies requires a person to diligently be aware of what they are eating at all times. It can be all-consuming at times, for children and parents. The question is, when does being cautious about avoiding reactions turn into an unhealthy fear of food?

A child or teen with an unhealthy fear of food can display many different signs of disordered eating. Typically when people hear the phrase 'eating disorder', they think about anorexia or bulimia. The incidence of these disorders among those with food allergies is unknown. Little research has been done on the topic.

Most of the time, those with food allergies do not have eating disorders. Disordered eating, however, is much more common among individuals with food allergies and in society in general. This means that one's relationship with food is moderately to severely disrupted, affecting one's quality of life.

Developing a healthy relationship with food is a challenge for many people, and one that becomes an even bigger task for individuals with food allergies. Disordered eating can manifest in many different ways, including food phobias or obsessive compulsive thoughts and behaviours with respect to food.

Among the most common fears experienced by those who have life-threatening food allergies is fear of anaphylaxis or memory of a severe food-allergic reaction. This can be experienced by both children and their parents. Fear of eating can lead to various different ways of avoiding allergic reactions. Some people choose to eat only what they prepare from raw materials; others eat foods only if they are prepared by specific people (or one person); some will not eat outside the home, or might avoid social situations where food may be involved, such as play dates and parties.

Many individuals with food allergies are advised to check a label two or three times: once in the store; once



when putting the food away; and once before eating it. Compulsive behaviours, such as checking and rechecking labels excessively beyond what is typically recommended, may cause anxiety. Anxiety of a reaction can also cause individuals who are managing food allergies to become distrustful of others,

including family members, even in situations where a reaction is highly unlikely.

As a general rule, children learn how to regulate their emotions from their parents. An excessively anxious parent may over-restrict their child's developmentally appropriate activities. For example, they

may avoid social situations that include food.

Helping our children and teens develop safe eating habits without being excessively anxious requires that we instil and model calm, safe and cautious practices regarding what, when, where and how we eat.

As parents of children with life-threatening food allergies, we want them to experience all the things that non-allergic children experience. Therefore, it is important to provide our children with age-appropriate social situations to help them build confidence and self-esteem with regard to managing food allergies.

It is important parents strive for a healthy caution rather than becoming overly anxious or afraid of a reaction, despite appropriate measures to avoid food allergens.

When should you seek help? When is it time to talk to someone about the possibility of your child having disordered eating behaviours? If you observe any eating behaviours that are negatively impacting your child's quality of life, or if your child is purposely avoiding activities because of food, or refusing to eat in public, talk to your child. Share your concern about their behaviours, and listen to their concerns.

If you or your child are feeling overwhelmed, it would certainly be

appropriate to speak with a professional. If your child is restricting foods to the point of failure to thrive, or shifting on the growth curve or experiencing significant weight loss, it would be important to share your concerns with your allergist and/or paediatrician.

You can empower your child to choose safe foods by creating food labels that indicate, for example, 'This food is safe for Jane'. Reassure your child that foods served to them by you, or a trusted adult you designate, are safe for them, and that caregivers know how to keep them safe. When dining out, model calm, safe ordering practices such as speaking to a chef or manager prior to ordering and alerting the server of ingredients that must be avoided.

Our children learn from us every day. They look at the expression on our faces; they read our tone of voice. It is our job as parents to teach our children that while life with food allergies may be hard, it does not define who they are. It is part of them, not all of them.

If you feel that your child is experiencing an overwhelming amount of anxiety with respect to their food allergies, talk to your child's paediatrician or mental health counsellor. There are many counsellors who treat anxiety and children with food allergies. Always know that you are not alone in this, and neither is your child.

Anxious child?

If you think your child is anxious, it is important to get help sooner rather than later. In the last issue of *Allergy Today* (Spring, Issue 134), we featured Professor Paula Barrett, who talked about triggers for anxiety, protective factors, and how to recognise anxiety. Professor Barrett, a clinical psychologist and world expert in anxiety in children, developed the scientifically validated Friends for Life programme, which has been recognised by the WHO as best practice for the prevention and treatment of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents.

This programme operates in New Zealand and you can find more information at www.lifepaths.org.nz.

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