

Want to raise a resilient teen?

Teaching your children how to manage their food allergies responsibly starts from the word go. And you can help to ensure that your own anxiety is not passed on to your child when you tell others about your child's allergies:

- Be matter-of-fact. Keep calm and be aware of the tone of your voice and the unspoken messages you are sending your child when you educate others.
- Be careful of the language you use when you talk about the dangers. Although it's important to convey seriousness, constant references to death will not help.
- Involve your child when teaching others. Avoid talking about your child's allergies as if he/she is not present.
- Remember that the aim is to help your child to feel empowered to handle people and situations. Be careful not to instil panic or fear, which may

overwhelm and stifle your child.

- Find reliable articles that discuss allergies, such as those published in *Allergy Today*, and show them to babysitters, friends, relatives and others. It is not uncommon for friends and relatives to be more casual than you want about your child's allergy. If the information comes from an authoritative source, or in writing, these important people will often be more open, accepting and careful, and your anxiety will reduce.

KEEP EXPECTATIONS REALISTIC

Modify your strategy as your child grows older. Keeping things too simple may hinder your child's ownership of the allergy, but if your expectations are set above the child's capability, your child may feel defeated. Overprotection can send the signal that you think your child is not capable of handling situations. You will need to search for a balance that's right for your family.

EATING AT RESTAURANTS

It can be natural for parents to want to maintain tight control in a restaurant setting. Balance caution with education. Don't wait until your child is 12 years old to begin lessons on how to order a restaurant meal. By this age, many children will be spending time with friends, including eating out. Your window of opportunity appears when children are much younger.

Expose your child to as many new dining situations as possible. Allow the child to order food while you are able to supervise, at places such as sports events, cinemas, fast-food restaurants, holiday sites etc. You both will learn something new from each situation.

Teach your child at an early age that there are restaurants that are particularly high-risk places. For example, Asian restaurants are risky for people with peanut, tree nut or fish allergy; seafood houses must be rejected by anyone with a fish or shellfish allergy. Buffet queues are also potentially high-risk situations. Help your child to assess and minimise risks.

Special tip: Avoid ordering fast-food from drive-in takeaways. Go inside and speak with a real person. Eye contact is important when you explain your allergies. Ask to see the ingredient lists, too.

CHEF CARDS

Some teens and young adults use a chef card for informing wait staff about their food allergy. These cards should be easy to carry and durable. One young adult typed hers on fluorescent paper and laminated it, for years of use. Another had business cards made listing the ingredients he needed to avoid, along with tips for preventing cross-contamination. You can look at the allergen lists at www.allergy.org.nz, Allergy Help, Reading Labels And Sourcing Safe Foods. There is

an allergen guide you can download and then make your own chef card using some of the terms.

Don't become too anxious if your child makes mistakes at first when ordering a meal. Use these mistakes as an opportunity to educate. Be sure, however, not to embarrass your child in front of the restaurant staff or friends. To minimise mistakes, review basic questions and menu selection ideas at home before leaving for the restaurant. Once there, let your child do the ordering. If a question has not been asked, bring it up discreetly. For example, say to the waiter, "I also have a question for you..."

Treat your child with respect and you'll get it back ten-fold. Ask your child before you leave for the restaurant how you should handle a particular situation that may come up. For example, "What if the waiter doesn't take you seriously? Should we speak up or let you handle it?" Teach your child to trust his or her instincts. If the waiter doesn't quite get the point, encourage your child to ask to speak to the manager or chef.

RECOGNISING A REACTION

Teach your child what symptoms to expect, with words appropriate for their age. For example, a toddler may only need to know, "nuts will make you very sick." A 12-year-old should know in more detail the symptoms that may occur. However, be careful not to be so graphic that your child develops a fear of eating. Instead, stress the importance of avoiding high-risk foods and getting help quickly if a reaction occurs.



TREATING A REACTION

At some point, children will need to know how to treat a reaction themselves. As soon as your child is ready to understand what treatment entails, you could go through the procedure using a trainer pen, following the patient information leaflet supplied with your child's injector pen.

CARRYING MEDICATION

From the beginning, teach your child never to leave home without prescribed medications. Being prepared for an allergic reaction is the key to a safe life. Starting at an early age, have your child become responsible for carrying the medication to the car. If your child forgets it, turn around and go home. Being that strict with this rule will save you lots of stress and arguments later.

Parents are role models to their children.

If you sometimes leave your child's medication kit at home when you go out, it will be natural that this is what your child will learn to do.

PACKING THE ADRENALINE KIT

One of the frequent questions parents ask is how to conceal the adrenaline kit so their children will carry it. This is easiest for girls who carry handbags. However, there are a number of other solutions that families have found along the way. A mobile phone case is just one, or you may find something suitable in a camping shop. Waist packs are popular for young children. As children grow, they want to 'blend in' with friends, and may want to conceal the medication kit. A homemade carrier attached to belt loops, or to a belt, works well for girls and boys. This can be hidden easily under clothing. Often, small waist packs concealed under clothing work just as well. Waist packs can also be attached to sports bags, bikes, or golf bags.

RECRUITING FRIENDS

Have your child teach close friends about food allergies, what foods to avoid and what to do if a reaction occurs.

One mum had this to say: "We presented the following scenario to our son's friends: 'You and our son are at your house and you have a snack. Then you head out on your bikes. On the way, our son starts coughing, his lips are swelling, and he is having trouble breathing. This is what you need to do...' Teach the friends' parents, as well. Chances are, your child will be spending a lot of time at their house."

