

The ABCs of Food Allergies in Schools



Food allergies are a puzzling challenge and a source of stress for schools, parents and for people like you, who work with children. They must be taken seriously because allergic reactions can have devastating outcomes.

The three best ways to handle food allergies:
Awareness - Action - Prevention

A) AWARENESS

Food allergies

Food allergies are caused by the immune system's excessive sensitivity to the proteins in foods. The body perceives these proteins, called allergens, as enemies, triggering an allergic reaction. The ten most common allergens in Canada are peanuts, nuts, wheat, sesame seeds, milk, eggs, fish, crustaceans and mollusks, mustard, soy and sulfites. Other foods can also trigger serious allergic reactions, as can insect bites, drugs and latex.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction

Allergic reactions often occur shortly after contact with an allergen (several minutes to two hours after exposure) and can spontaneously resurface several hours later (8 hours). Symptoms vary from one person to the next, depending on exposure to the allergen and the type of allergy. The following is a list of common symptoms to watch for:

- ▶ Redness and stinging around the mouth or on the lips or tongue
- ▶ Swelling of the eyes, lips, tongue or face
- ▶ Watery eyes
- ▶ Stomach cramps, vomiting or diarrhoea
- ▶ Change in voice, tightening of the throat or difficulty breathing

Anaphylaxis

Anaphylaxis is a severe, rapid-onset allergic reaction. It can cause a drop in blood pressure, also known as anaphylactic shock. **If this should occur, you must immediately call 9-1-1**



9-1-1 and follow the school's emergency plan.

The epinephrine autoinjector (commercially known as EpiPen or Allerject) must immediately be administered if symptoms of a serious allergic reaction are observed. It is a drug that can save a child's life by helping him breathe and stabilizing his blood pressure while waiting for emergency services to arrive. Any child who has received a dose of epinephrine must be taken to the hospital.

B) ACTION

All schools must have a protocol for handling food allergies. The school nurse is there to familiarize you with the protocol, which includes information on the following topics:

- ▶ Identifying children with allergies – you should be able to identify at-risk children and know which foods could cause an allergic reaction.
- ▶ Storing medication – You should know where the epinephrine injectors are kept. They should not be locked in a drawer or closet. Rather, they should be easily accessible. Starting at age 6 or 7, many children wear their epinephrine autoinjector in a special bag around their waist.
- ▶ Emergency plan – You must be able to recognize the symptoms of an allergic reaction, know how to use an epinephrine autoinjector and know what to do if anaphylaxis sets in.
- ▶ Preventative measures to reduce the risk of exposure to allergens
- ▶ Measures to take while on a school outing

C) PREVENTION

1. Do not allow children to share food.
2. Watch for cross-contamination. Wash your hands before opening the package, dish or thermos of a child with an allergy. Warm up his or her plate separately; it only takes one particle from another dish to trigger an allergic reaction. Use a clean utensil to stir the dish when it comes out of the microwave.
3. Make sure children practice good hygiene by having them wash their hands before and after a meal and wipe down the table after eating. Do not ask children with allergies to clean up after other children's lunches or to wipe the tables.
4. Carefully read the list of ingredients on a food package before offering it to children with allergies. When in doubt, contact the parents for approval. For special occasions, focus on activities rather than food.



Children with allergies should not be made to eat alone. Reassure the parents that you will make sure their children are not around allergens that other children have brought.

Some school boards have banned peanuts and nuts from schools. The heads of some schools may also restrict other foods that may cause allergic reactions. Keep in mind that prevention is much more effective than banning multiple foods, which can create a false sense of security. To prevent allergic reactions, both adults and children need to stay alert and practice good hygiene to prevent cross-contamination.



Even if peanuts and nuts are banned from schools, children who do not have allergies can still eat foods labelled "May contain peanuts or tree nuts." Children with peanut or tree nut allergies must not consume these products.