

Food Allergies and School

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Food allergies are abnormal responses of the body's immune system to certain foods. Food allergies can show up as rashes, swelling of the skin, nasal congestion, nausea and diarrhea or the most serious reaction – anaphylactic shock, which is life threatening. (1) The body's response to a food can increase in severity with repeated exposure to the food. One day a student may have a rash after eating a food, and the next exposure results in anaphylactic shock. Students with food allergies usually need to eliminate the problem foods from their diet (1).

If your student has a food allergy contact your physician for evaluation to confirm the allergy, and to write a prescription for a special diet. The diet order can be taken to the foodservice department or administered through the Pupil Special Services Department. The Pupil Special Services Department will develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is an all-school approach to accommodate the needs developed with a special diet.

New food labeling requires labels to list clearly ingredients or have a special warning label alerting consumers that the product contains one of the top eight food allergens. The FDA identifies eight foods or food groups as the major food allergens: milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans. In planning special diets, current food labels are reviewed for allergen ingredients. Problems can develop when food manufactures change ingredients, drop products, or are out of products. Most schools are purchasing groceries just as they are needed for meals. Substitutions can be sent to the schools. The person receiving the groceries may not have the time or education to evaluate the ingredient list of the new product.

Further potential problems develop in schools with meal service. Most schools have over 500 students. It is difficult for a food server to identify the child requiring a special diet. A system needs to be established to identify a child with a special diet yet not embarrass the child. The server needs to establish a procedure for changing serving utensils and gloves to prevent cross-contamination. Special diet foods need to be isolated from other menu items possibly containing the allergen. The ultimate challenge comes when a student sits down to eat with friends and they want to trade foods.

Consider the following ideas to help your student avoid problem foods:

- Try to avoid self-service lines where the serving utensil may be used for different dishes.
- Avoid fried foods. The same oil may be used for many different foods.
- Ask the foodservice director to copy you the special diet developed for your student. Ask questions about items that are un-clear.

- Consider packing lunch for your student when any menu item is un-clear.
- Discuss the menu with your student, and review which items might be risky.
- Provide the school with fast acting allergy medicine such as an epi-pen or Benadril.

1. America Dietetic Association Public Relations Team. (March 24, 2005). What is a Food Allergy? *ADA Daily TIPS*. Retrieved from:
http://www.eatright.org/cps/rde/xchg/ada/hs.xsl/home_4434_ENU_HTML.htm