

The Daily Union Article  
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Title: Food Allergy Awareness

There are many celebrations associated with the summer months – everything from graduation and promotion parties to wedding receptions and family reunions. These festivities typically include food which can present a very difficult challenge for children and adults with food allergies.

Food allergies are defined as abnormal reactions to food, even in the smallest amount. A reaction can occur even when there is no direct ingestion of the food they are allergic to. An allergic reaction can be caused by contaminated utensils or cutting surfaces that have been in contact with the source of the allergy.

When a person has a food allergy, their body's immune system mistakenly reacts to the food as a threat that will be harmful and thus produces antibodies for protection. The body then releases a body chemical, such as histamine, as part of that protection process. Within minutes (or up to a couple of hours) the person may begin to feel ill and show a reaction to the food. Reactions can show on the skin, in the digestive tract, through the respiratory system, or the cardiovascular system. The body's reaction can range from mild to extreme, if not life threatening.

At least 90% of all food-allergic reactions are tied to 8 specific foods:

Peanuts (which are legumes, not nuts)

Tree nuts (such as walnuts, cashews, or almonds to name a few)

Fish

Shellfish (such as shrimp, crab, crawfish and lobster)

Milk

Eggs

Wheat

How can you help your family members and friends address their food allergy challenges at these celebrations? Your first step is to become more aware and educated about food allergies and intolerances.

According to the FARE organization (Food Allergy Research & Education), one in 13 children has food allergies. Parent and guardians that care for those with food allergies need to take extra effort in avoiding the consumption of foods or food ingredients that can trigger an allergic reaction. You can't simply look at the food to determine if it

contains an allergen. You need to be able to read the food labels for each of the ingredients in the foods you prepare. Reading these labels every time you buy food is a potentially life-saving habit to develop. Even if you have purchased the same food a hundred different times, ingredients and manufacturing processes can change without warning. Labels will reveal if one of the eight common allergens are present in the food. Using the word "Contains" followed by the allergen's common name will help you identify the ingredients more readily.

Living with and/or preparing food for those who have reactions to food is nothing short of challenging. Good communication is vital. You can make adjustments to the menu if you are not aware of the food allergies your guests may have. Likewise, your guests can not make menu decisions unless they know what is in the food that was prepared. Many reactions can be avoided if the dietary restrictions are made known in advance. As the host, don't be afraid to put a note at the bottom of the invitation asking guests to disclose any food allergies they may have.

Don't make assumptions about what's in your food (especially if you purchased it ready-made.) Cross contamination (where food residue from one dish or ingredient comes in contact with food residue from another dish or ingredient.)

Here are some examples of assumptions that can pose a threat to those with food allergies:

- Removing nuts off a salad thinking that it will be safe
- Assuming the cooking temperature will kill allergens
- Using salad tongs for one type of cold salad as well as another prepared salad that may contain a food allergen
- Chopping nuts and a salad on the same cutting board
- Taking a spoon used to serve cream soup and then stirring a milk-free soup
- Using mixers, pans, etc. multiple times in the preparation of a variety of foods

The guests at your celebration have little or no control over what the menu items contain or have been exposed to. You can reduce their challenge by being conscientious of their needs during the food preparation process AND by labeling you menu items with any ingredients that are known food allergens to your guests. Simply use an index card folded in half and write the dish's name and the potential allergen below it. For example, "No Bake Cookies: Contains Peanut Butter." I have been at some functions where the entire ingredient list is provided for each menu item. This would be especially helpful if you were unable to communicate with guests in advance.

The American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology offers additional precautions you can take:

- Offer a wide variety of food to accommodate all allergies and restrictions. Provide simple option that can be made from scratch for specific guests. When you control the food preparation and ingredients, you can provide a much higher level of assurance to your guests.
- Be aware of cross contamination challenges in order to avoid some of the common mistakes based on assumptions mentioned previously in this article.
- If you have others helping you serve the meal, inform them of any specific food allergies so that they can take appropriate precautions.

You want everyone at your celebration to be able to enjoy their experience. Taking steps to ensure the food is safe for everyone's consumption is critical. Keeping the lines of communication open coupled with an awareness of food allergies and their effect will help every enjoy themselves.

If you have questions about food allergies and intolerances, please contact me at our Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!