



Food allergies are serious business.



Hidden Dangers

By Jo Ann Buck

When 16-year-old Julie leaves home on a date, her mom and dad are less anxious than they used to be. Like other teens with food allergies, Julie could be at risk for a fatal, food-triggered allergic reaction (anaphylaxis). She is allergic to cow's milk. But, Julie, with her parents' guidance, has begun to take charge of her health. She is more informed and careful: "Even very small traces in food that you're allergic to, like cow's milk for me, can cause a serious reaction."

As teens grow toward adulthood, they also must grow more responsible for their health. Parents are partners in this growth. They help their teens manage their food allergies and help teens take charge. Recent studies show that over 50 percent of the deaths from severe allergic reactions to foods occur in teens. These teens have a "known food allergy ... and did not receive prompt treatment with epinephrine," the injected medication that is the first-line response to anaphylaxis, says Scott Sicherer, M.D., FAAP, associate professor of pediatric allergy and immunology at Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York and a member of the executive committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Section on Allergy and Immunology.

Although most parents expect teenagers to take risks, the poor choices food-allergic teens make are especially dangerous because they could lead to death. These risks occur because teens may be more likely to eat unsafe foods, deny reaction symptoms, and delay

treatment. They also neglect to carry their life-saving rescue medication, epinephrine, says Dr. Sicherer, who is co-author of *The Complete Peanut Allergy Handbook*. Why do they do it? Surveys of food-allergic teens reveal that many take risks because they feel that the food allergy socially isolates them. In fact, 94 percent of surveyed teens said that social isolation was the worst part of having a food allergy.

Help Your Teens Take Charge

Parents raise their children to become responsible adults in other areas of their lives. They also need to help them shape safe adult behaviors for living with their food allergies. There are several strategies you can use to shape these behaviors in your teens.

Help teens learn to talk about their food allergies.

In a restaurant, at a picnic, at an amusement park, or at other social events, have your teen ask the right questions to those preparing and serving foods. You've asked these questions many times; now your teenager needs a chance to perfect this skill. The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) works to build public awareness of food allergy through education, advocacy, and research efforts (www.foodallergy.org). The FAAN's Web site offers teens a strategy to make their food allergies known — a template for a chef's card that teens can download. Teens note their food allergies on the card and carry it with them to give to a chef, cafeteria staff member, server, or restaurant manager to make sure food will be safe.

Friends and dates are important to teens. So close friends need to become allies in managing their food allergies. Help teens learn to discuss their allergies with those who care about them. These people will want to keep them safe. Some teens who have spoken with their friends found they got the support they needed. One 17-year-old added in an online discussion forum that some of her close friends "have become as cautious as I am ... I feel honored that they care enough about me to join my world of reading, checking, and rechecking."

Especially important is talking with dates about food allergies. Although having a food allergy doesn't mean that teens can't date, it does mean that they have to be extra careful. One Web site, *Food Allergies in the Real World*, was created for young adults who are taking a more active role in managing their food allergies. The site gives teens advice on how to approach dates and conduct Food Allergy 101 in an online "Dating Game" (www.fanteen.org/advice/dating_game.php). Strategies include making a list of the details about the food allergy to tell a date. The list will make sure that teens don't omit important information when talking about their food allergy with dates. Although dates don't need a complete medical history, they should know that a severe reaction could warrant a trip to the emergency room.

The site also advises them to practice what they will say so it comes across as casual, but serious. Encourage your teen to practice these conversations with you. Help your teen practice such simple statements as "I can't eat in a seafood restaurant," or "I'm allergic to peanuts. Please don't eat peanuts before our date. If you do eat peanuts, please brush your teeth and wash your hands before you pick me up so that I won't have a reaction." Dating is about teens' rehearsing for more adult relationships and finding out whom they

are comfortable with. Dates who pressure teens into taking harmful chances won't measure up. On the other hand, dates who make an effort to learn about these food allergies show they are worth the relationship. They deserve to be told how much their efforts mean, so help your teen learn to express appreciation to them.

Help teens become advocates.

Although you will continue to work with doctors, teachers, and school officials, it will be important for teens to begin these relationships themselves. Encourage your teenager to ask your pediatrician any questions. Teens with allergies can also work with school administrators, nurses, and meal planners to suggest that more safe food items be added to school menus. You can even help your teen plan an event at school with teachers and nurses to raise awareness about food allergies.

There are many risks during the teen years, but you will be able to decrease one of them by helping your teen learn to manage a food allergy. The consequences of a severe untreated allergy can be fatal so make sure your teen is educated and prepared. ●

