

Sending Children with Food Allergies to School Can be Stressful, Potentially Dangerous

Experts offer tips to help parents prepare for the school year and keep kids with food allergies safe

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DENVER — As summer winds down, parents and children are preparing for the start of the school year, but for children with food allergies, heading to school for the first time can come with significant stress and anxiety. When a child is at school, they're away from the watchful eye of their parents — those who can best control their children's exposure to allergens and recognize symptoms of a reaction. This issue affects more families than ever before as the number of children with food allergies has risen to one in 13, or about two per classroom.

"Ensuring that parents and school personnel are all on the same page as far as preventing exposures and treating symptoms is critical to keeping food-allergic children safe," said [BJ Lanser, MD](#), Director of the [Pediatric Food Allergy Program](#) at National Jewish Health in Denver. "In severe cases, a child doesn't even have to eat a food to have life-threatening anaphylaxis. Just sitting next to a student who has food they're allergic to can trigger a reaction."

Lanser says a few simple preparations before the school year starts can go a long way in protecting a child from an accidental exposure to allergens.

"The simpler you can make it for everyone at the school, the better," said Dr. Lanser. "Things like food allergy alert bracelets can be useful to make sure that anyone who comes in contact with that student throughout the day can easily identify them and assist them when needed." Dr. Lanser offers four simple tips that can help parents prepare to send their food-allergic child to school and provide some peace of mind that they will remain healthy in the classroom.

- **Meet with school staff members** – Before the school year begins, meet with teachers, principals, nurses and cafeteria staff members. This ensures that everyone is informed and allows a parent to understand how their child's school manages food allergies. "Given the prevalence of food allergies, it's something that schools are certainly aware of and there are policies in place to ensure students' safety," said Dr. Lanser. "Meeting with school personnel allows parents to ask questions and inform staff members about their child's specific needs. It also helps put a parent's mind at ease to see for these precautionary measures for themselves."
- **Create a written plan** - Outline all necessary information on your child's allergy, including how to prevent accidental exposures and how to recognize and treat symptoms of an allergic reaction. And don't forget to include your contact information. "An allergist can help you prepare this plan so that it includes clear and comprehensive information," said Dr. Lanser. "It should be on file with the school, and everyone who comes in contact with that child throughout the day should have a copy."
- **Post pictures** - Tape pictures of your child to the classroom wall that includes information on their allergies to alert anyone that comes into the room. You can also post one on your child's desk, which can serve as a secondary reminder when snacks are served. "If there is a substitute or another parent that visits the classroom, they may not be aware of a student's food allergies," said Dr. Lanser. "Posting a photo is a quick and easy reference for anyone who does not have that child's action plan."
- **Make safe snacks** - Pack allergen-free snacks for your child in case someone brings in a treat for the class. Send the snacks to school with a label specifying that they are safe, or leave some with their teacher so your child won't feel left out during classroom celebrations. "We certainly don't want a child with food allergies to feel excluded or different from everybody else," said Dr. Lanser. "Allowing them to participate in classroom activities with treats and snacks that are safe for them lets them be a part of the fun just like any other kid."

In addition to these tips, Dr. Lanser says every student with food allergies should have a supply of emergency medications readily available, including oral antihistamines and an epinephrine autoinjector. "It's really all about being

prepared and vigilant,” said Dr. Lanser. “Taking these steps and keeping kids safe allows them to enjoy the school day and concentrate on learning rather than their food allergies.”

Open and frequent communication with your child’s teacher is also extremely important. Jennifer Ware’s 7-year-old son, Jacob, is severely allergic to milk, eggs and shellfish. She says her son’s second grade teacher would call and text her during the school day with any questions.

“Sometimes there would be little classroom parties or maybe an art project, and if she wasn’t sure about an ingredient or a snack, she would just send a quick text to ask me about it,” said Ware. “A lot of times you really have to read through a label to see if a milk or egg product is hidden in the ingredients, so it was reassuring that his teacher was careful and could reach out to me if there were any issues. I’ve already met with his third grade teacher to keep that kind of communication flowing next school year.”

Allergists at National Jewish Health helped Ware develop a school action plan for Jacob that includes clear communication to staff members on what his allergies are, how to prevent exposure and what to do if he has an anaphylactic reaction. Ware also left a supply of medication and an epi pen in Jacob’s classroom should he need it.

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