FOOD ALLERGIES IN CHILDREN

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Food allergies are a growing concern in the United States, with increasing numbers of children being diagnosed. Since allergic reactions can be life-threatening, it is important for individuals to understand what food allergies are, be able to identify the symptoms of an allergic reaction, and know how to respond in an emergency situation.

What is a Food Allergy?
A food allergy occurs when an individual consumes a food or drink containing a normally harmless substance that the body's immune system mistakenly believes will cause harm. When the substance is consumed an allergic reaction occurs.

What are the Most Common Food Allergies?
The eight foods that most commonly cause allergic reactions in children include:

- Milk
- Eggs
- Fish
- Shell Fish
- Wheat
- Soy
- Peanuts
- Tree Nuts

Even though these are the most common food allergies, individuals can have reactions to other foods and drinks as well.

What are the Symptoms of an Allergic Reaction?
An individual's reaction to a food allergy can range from mild discomfort to a severe, life-threatening emergency.

- Reactions typically occur within a few minutes and up to several hours after exposure.
- Possible symptoms: Development of flushed/red skin, hives or a rash, coughing, wheezing, or difficulty breathing, dizzy or light headed, confusion, swelling of the lips, tongue, eyes, or face, tingling feeling in the mouth, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.
- Symptoms that seem minor at first may progress in severity if not treated.

What is Anaphylaxis?
Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that has a fast onset and can result in death if not quickly treated.

- Symptoms of anaphylaxis can vary, but it may quickly result in constriction of the airways and swelling of the throat, difficulty breathing, a drop in blood pressure, and loss of consciousness.
- Epinephrine is the medication used to treat anaphylaxis. If used quickly it can help to reverse the life-threatening symptoms of anaphylaxis.

Is There a Cure for Food Allergies?
Currently there is not a treatment or a cure for food allergies. Only the symptoms of an allergic reaction can be treated. This is why anyone with a food allergy should carefully avoid all known food allergens. If you think your child has a food allergy, schedule an appointment with your pediatrician for evaluation and diagnosis.

Tips for Managing Food Allergies

Read Food Labels:
- Carefully read the food labels on all foods and beverages purchased.
- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires all packaged items be labeled if they contain one of the eight major allergens.

Communicate:
- Make sure anyone your child spends time with knows about your child's food allergies and has been trained on how to administer epinephrine. This includes caregivers, relatives, friends, and the school.

Prevent Cross Contamination:
- Cross contamination is the transfer of an allergen from one food to another food, surface, dish, or cooking utensil.
- Tips to Prevent Cross Contamination
  - Wash hands with soap and warm water regularly. Teach your child to wash hands before and after eating. Make sure to wash your hands before preparing food for your child.
  - Teach your child the importance of not sharing food, drinks, cups, plates, silverware, and straws with others.
  - Thoroughly wash kitchen surfaces, utensils, pots, pans, dishes, and cups with hot water and soap.
  - If a food contains a known allergen, do not remove the allergen from the food and assume the item is safe to eat. Even a small amount of an allergen can cause an allergic reaction.

Plan Ahead When Going Out:
- Carry hand wipes with you, especially to outdoor events, so that your child can clean his/her hands before eating.
- Bring allergy-free snacks with you that you know are safe for your child to eat.
- At restaurants tell your waiter about your child's food allergies and ask about allergens in menu items.
- When going to a friend's house make sure to tell the parent about your child's food allergies and how to treat an allergic reaction.

Be Prepared!
- Always carry your child's epinephrine with you when leaving the house, as you never know when an emergency situation could arise.