

Understanding Food Allergies and Food Intolerances



Many people do not understand the implications of food allergies, especially if they have never had any personal exposure to the condition through family or friends. Sometimes, without firsthand experience to the serious side-effects of allergies, some people may not take the issue seriously. They may unknowingly or carelessly put others at risk by not helping to minimize exposure to potential allergens. This creates a lot of pressure on your child care centre to educate the community and manage a safe environment to prevent serious injury or death resulting from any type of reaction.

What are Food Allergies, Food Intolerances, and Anaphylaxis?

- A **food allergy** happens when a person's immune system treats a substance, the allergen, like an invader. The body produces an immune response where white blood cells deploy to the affected area. In severe cases this response can cause Anaphylaxis with symptoms including an itchy rash, throat swelling, and low blood pressure. In extreme cases the allergic reaction can be life threatening. The worst reactions typically occur after eating the food, but in some cases even touching the food is enough to cause the response. For these reasons child care centres must be very vigilant in supporting children with allergies, and prepared to respond if a food allergy occurs
- **Food intolerance** is when a person has a reaction to food that does not include the immune system. A food intolerance can be very uncomfortable, but is not dangerous or life threatening. Intolerance to a particular food is usually caused by the body's inability to digest that food or components of it. It usually takes more than a minor exposure to an allergen to cause a food intolerance reaction
- **Anaphylaxis** is the most serious allergic reaction that occurs rapidly after exposure to the allergic food and may cause death. Symptoms can include the flare up of an itchy rash, severe throat swelling, and low blood pressure. Individuals with known





allergies will often travel with an EpiPen full of epinephrin (adrenaline). In response to an anaphylaxis allergic reaction an EpiPen should be applied to the persons thigh as an intramuscular injection. Even if the person responds well to the epinephrin injection, medical assistance should be called for after any anaphylaxis reaction. It is important to note that for some people they just have to touch the food to be at risk

Can I be Allergic?

According to the Canadian Pediatric Society, children with a parent or sibling who have an allergy are considered high risk for developing a food allergy themselves. Parents with children who are at high risk for developing an allergy should always try new foods at home before they are introduced in an external setting, such as a child care or school. If the child demonstrates any reaction at any point to the food, stop giving them that particular food. Consult with your child's pediatrician for allergy testing in order to prevent further dangerous outbreaks or symptoms.

How Child Care Centres Can Help Manage the Risk

While difficult to completely eliminate all sources of allergens, it is possible to reduce the risk. Here are some tips on how you can help reduce the risk of accidental exposure:

- Wash hands and mouth after eating
- Take precautions to minimize cross-contamination when preparing food for others
- Read food labels and ask food allergic individuals about their specific needs. Note that some allergens go by different names so be aware and educate yourself on the multiple naming conventions for specific allergens
- Ensure that children do not share food, utensils or containers with food-allergic friends
- Educate **ALL** the children on the importance of food safety
- Properly clean surfaces and toys and dispose of food items after meals and snacks
- Provide adult supervision of young children when they are eating or when there is food around
- Ensure that food brought into the facility is clearly labelled and identified
- Consult parents of food-allergic children whenever food is involved

With community understanding and support, allergic reactions and deaths can be prevented. **Thanks** for doing your part to create a safe and healthy environment!

Sources:

<http://www.allergysafecommunities.ca/risk-reduction-strategies/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKVjKC3u9hk> (a video to help understand Food Allergies)