

Anaphylaxis Canada



Living Confidently With Food Allergy

A guide for parents and families



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PLEASE READ THIS NOTE BEFORE READING THE HANDBOOK

The information in this handbook is general in nature and for information and educational purposes only. It is meant to help people learn how to manage a child's allergies. It is not meant to give specific medical advice, recommendations, diagnosis, or treatment.

Readers should not rely on any information contained in this handbook as a replacement or substitute for professional medical advice or diagnosis or treatment. Nor should they delay getting professional medical advice or treatment because of information contained in this handbook. Medical knowledge is constantly developing.

Please speak with your child's doctor or other healthcare professional before making any medical decision that affects your child or if you have any questions or concerns about their food allergies.

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Avoiding Food Allergens

An allergen is anything that causes an allergic reaction, such as certain foods. People can be allergic to almost any food, but for labelling purposes the most common food allergens are known as “priority” or “major” allergens. There are different ways to come in contact with a food allergen, they are: eating, touching and in rare cases, inhaling the food protein. Contact with the nose and eyes can also cause a reaction. Understanding how to avoid contact with a food allergen will help prevent allergic reactions.

Oral ingestion (mouth)

Eating an allergen causes most serious reactions. Other ways that allergens could be ingested are through saliva (e.g. kissing) or cross-contamination.⁵ Even ingesting a small amount of a food allergen can cause a reaction. Most of these reactions can be prevented by reading labels and taking steps to prevent cross-contamination.



Skin contact (touch)

Skin contact can cause hives or other skin symptoms where the allergen touches the skin. In most cases, healthy skin does a good job of keeping allergens out of our bodies, and serious reactions from skin contact are rare.^{6,7} If an allergen comes in contact with skin, wash it off to decrease the chance that it will accidentally get into the mouth, eyes or nose (where it can possibly cause a more serious reaction). This is why washing hands before eating or touching the eyes, nose or mouth is important.⁸ Keep in mind that people, especially young children, frequently touch their mouths, as well as their eyes and nose.^{9,10}



Inhalation (breathing in)

In some cases, allergic reactions can happen when food proteins are inhaled through the air, such as:

- In steam from cooking food (e.g. sizzling fish)
- When food in a powdered form is released into the air (e.g. blowing powdered milk)
- When small amounts get into the air when food is crushed or ground (e.g. tree nuts).⁸



These reactions are usually mild, but in rare cases people have had severe reactions.^{6,8,11}

The smell of a food alone cannot cause an allergic reaction. The smell is caused by volatile organic compounds (VOCs) , which are not proteins.

Teaching Children

Here are some simple rules to teach your child and things for them to keep in mind:

- Wash your hands before eating or touching your nose, eyes or mouth.
- Only eat food that is made for you. It's not safe to share food.
- Don't share spoons, forks, knives, cups, bottles or straws.
- If you get an allergen on your skin, ask an adult for help, clean it off and wash your hands.

Make hand-washing fun for young kids - sing a song that lasts about 30 seconds.



Understanding Labels

Reading labels is important for managing food allergies. It is not possible to know if an allergen is in a food just by looking at it. Allergens can be found in places that you don't normally expect to find them. Also, food companies may change ingredients without telling consumers. This is why it is so important for you and your child (at the right age) to read labels before eating a food.

Safety tips for reading labels



Read the label before serving a food even if it has been “safe” in the past. Remember that ingredients can change without notice.

Read ingredient lists carefully from start to finish. Food companies do not have to make allergens stand out in any way (e.g. **bolding**, *italicizing*, or underlining the print).

Do not buy a packaged food product that does not have an ingredient label.

If you are not sure about a product, call the company to find out if it contains an allergen.

Do not buy food from bulk bins even if they have labels on the bins. Shoppers may have used the same scoops in different bins, and this can cause cross-contamination.

Labelling laws do not cover certain products. Read labels on non-food products such as vitamins, skin creams and pet food. These can contain food allergens. Other examples are modeling clay which may contain wheat, and finger paint, which may contain egg.⁸

Do not eat food with precautionary or advisory statements such as a “*may contain*”, “*processed in a facility...*” or “*made in a factory that also processes*”. Do not try to guess whether there is a risk based on the type of statement used, even if you have had the product before. Researchers have found that some products with these statements actually contain enough allergen to cause an allergic reaction.¹²

Be cautious of imported products because food labelling regulations vary by country.

Labelling laws may change so check your country’s government website for the most recent regulations.

- Health Canada - Food Allergen Labelling Regulations – <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/> 🇨🇦
- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) - Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 - <http://www.fda.gov/> 🇺🇸

Priority Allergens

CANADA 

 MILK	 EGG	 TREE NUTS	 PEANUTS	 WHEAT	 MUSTARD SEED
 FISH*	 CRUSTACEAN*	 SHELLFISH*	 SULPHITE	 SOY	 SESAME

*Seafood

UNITED STATES 

 MILK	 EGG	 TREE NUTS	 PEANUTS	 WHEAT	 FISH	 CRUSTACEAN SHELLFISH	 SOY
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Label reading activities

- Choose a few food packages from your kitchen cupboards and read the labels carefully. This is an easy way to practice label reading. Remember to look for precautionary statements that often follow ingredient lists.
- Give yourself more time for grocery shopping so you can read food labels carefully. As you become used to different products, label reading will become a habit and grocery shopping will take less time.

Download the Label Reading exercise at www.anaphylaxis.ca and www.allergyhome.org



Food companies choose when to use precautionary statements. **They are not required by law to do this.** They can also choose when to put “allergen-free” claims such as “peanut-free” or “milk-free” on packages.

Teaching Children

Children pay attention to what you do. When they see you read labels, they will learn that this is important.

- Even from a young age, your child can learn how to read a food label with your help. Start practicing when your child begins to read. Practice label reading at home and when shopping. This is a good way for your child to learn skills with you present. Over time, this will become a habit for your child.
- Praise your child for reading food labels carefully. They should know you are proud of them for taking the right steps to stay safe.
- Your child can also practice teaching others how to read a food label.



Teach all family members and people responsible for feeding your child how to read labels.

Cross-Contamination (Cross-Contact)

You may hear the term “cross-contamination” or “cross-contact” when people talk about possible risks for those with food allergies. Cross-contamination can happen when a small amount of a food allergen gets into another food accidentally or when it is present in saliva, on a surface or on an object. This small amount of an allergen could cause an allergic reaction.

Examples of cross-contamination⁸

- Food to food - For example, nuts on top of a salad will lead to cross-contamination of other foods in the salad, even if the nuts are taken off.
- Food to object - Cookware, dishes, utensils (e.g. forks, spoons, knives) or cooking surfaces that are not properly cleaned before preparing food for someone with a food allergy could lead to cross-contamination.
- Food to saliva - Food allergens can be passed on through saliva from people and pets. Anything that goes into the mouth could be a possible source of cross-contamination.⁵



Keep in mind that children understand more as they get older. There can be more risks for young children who learn about their world by touching. They often have poor hand-washing skills and may put things (e.g. toys) into their mouths and touch their eyes and nose.^{9 10}

Older children are better at hand-washing, but new issues come up as they mature. For example, they may not think about the risks of sharing lipstick or kissing.

Ways to reduce the risk of cross-contamination

- Teach your child to wash their hands before and after eating or before touching their eyes, nose or mouth. A small research study found that soap and water and commercial hand-wipes removed allergens but hand sanitizing gels did not.¹³
- Carry hand wipes in case soap and water are not available.
- Do not share food, utensils, or drinks.
- Do not pick an allergen out of a food (e.g. removing nuts from a salad). This will not make it safe. The person with the food allergy will need a new meal prepared for them.
- Wash cookware (pots, pans), dishes and cutlery (spoons, knives, forks) well. Food that is stuck onto dishes or utensils that have gone through the dishwasher can still cause an allergic reaction.
- Clean surfaces with soap and water, commercial cleaners or commercial wipes.¹³
- Allergens can stay on sponges and towels so the safest option is to use disposable methods, such as paper towel or wipes.

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