

Why should you be aware of the signs of a food allergy? Because many families only discover a child's food allergy after her first reaction, and that reaction can be very serious.

## Food Allergy 101

*What to know before the first attack*

**Janine Boldrin**

Susan Bagley knew something was terribly wrong as she carried her daughter into the emergency room. Bagley's daughter was having trouble breathing and her face was swelling.





“My daughter’s food allergy was never suspected until the anaphylaxis episode,” recalls Bagley. “She had a history of reactive airway disease that was always treated as its own issue. Looking back, I realize now that her episodes could have been small exposures to the allergens. She was almost 4 when we found out and had the ‘perfect storm’ of allergens. She is the most allergic to almonds and cashews. One of each nut was consumed [that night].”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the mechanisms by which a person develops an allergy to specific foods are largely unknown.

“Even with my professional background as a registered dietitian and almost two years of breastfeeding, and a cautious approach to feeding age-appropriate foods as it relates to allergens, I found myself dumbfounded that my child would even be remotely susceptible to a food allergy,” says Bagley. “But, it can happen.”

### A Growing Problem

“Families often learn of a food allergy after a child’s first allergic reaction,” says Rita Malhotra-Kuczabski, M.D., author of *Doctor Mom’s Prescription for Managing Food Allergies*.

Approximately three million U.S. children and teenagers under the age of 18 have a food or digestive allergy, an increase of 18 percent between 1997 and 2007, according to a report by the CDC.

“If a parent has suspicion that their child may have a food allergy they should seek attention from a board-certified allergist immediately. If the child is allergic, it is imperative that an emergency action plan be formed, and appropriate medications be carried at all times,” says Malhotra-Kuczabski.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis, a severe whole allergic reaction, can appear within minutes to a few hours after eating a food.

“Anaphylaxis is life threatening ... It

is an emergency condition that needs to be addressed immediately,” says Bagley. “[My daughter] was treated at the emergency room. The next day she was seen by her primary care physician then referred out to an allergist.”

### The Basics

According to The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org), “A food allergy is a condition in which the immune system incorrectly identifies a food protein as a threat and attempts to protect the body against it by releasing chemicals into the blood. The release of these chemicals results in the symptoms of an allergic reaction.”

**Eight types of food account for 90 percent of all food allergies: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, soy and wheat.**

The most common symptoms include hives; itchy rash; swelling; itching, tingling or swelling of the lips, tongue or mouth; vomiting; abdominal cramps or diarrhea.

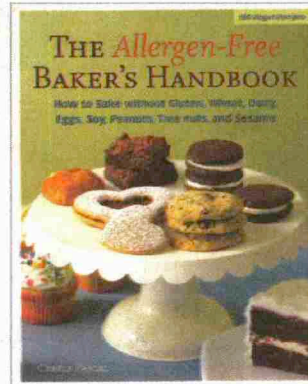
Food allergies are more prevalent in children than adults. Most children with food allergies will outgrow the problem, but it can remain a lifelong issue.

“Milk and egg [allergies] tend to surface in young children, while fish and shellfish often manifest in older kids and adults,” says Malhotra-Kuczabski. “It is worthy of mention that an individual can develop an allergy to a previously tolerated food.”

“Even trace amounts can cause a reaction in someone who is allergic. The allergen doesn’t even have to be ingested to cause a reaction,” says Jennifer Love, spokesperson for FAAN. “Skin contact or inhalation of protein, such as steam from cooking an allergen, “can sometimes trigger it.”

A FAAN review of food allergy fatalities found that most of the people had never had a severe allergic reaction until the one that caused their death.

Malhotra-Kuczabski says that, in some circumstances, there are several factors that can serve as early warning signs for parents in advance of an allergic reaction.



*The Allergen-Free Baker's Handbook*  
 Cybele Pascal (2010, [Celestial Arts](#))

Families with food allergies will enjoy this cookbook, which includes 100 vegan recipes. Bake breads, cakes, pies, cookies and other goodies, all without eggs, wheat, soy or other common allergens. Lots of full-color photos and basic how-to info about baking make this book a keeper.

“Families with atopic histories [such as asthma, food or environmental allergies or eczema] are at heightened risk. Infants with eczema or atopic dermatitis may be showing you early signs of allergic disease. In addition, asthma and chronic runny nose can be manifestations of allergies,” says Malhotra-Kuczabski.

There is no cure for food allergies. Strict avoidance of the food a child is allergic to is the only means by which to prevent a reaction.

### A Different World

Parents may feel overwhelmed when

they find out that their child has a food allergy. Gone are the carefree days when a parent can drop a toddler off at a friend's for a play date or at a nursery without worrying that an innocent snack might make their child sick. Parents may rush to educate themselves on food allergies but don't yet have the experience with the issue to draw upon.

"My daughter's allergy is to tree nuts, peanuts and sesame. Because of her severity, we cannot even have products in the house that are processed in the same facility as the allergens," says Bagley. "Challenges do arise when it comes to travel, going out to eat, birthday parties, but we do the best we can. We plan ahead, consult restaurants and speak to chefs, pack food, keep frozen cupcakes for birthday parties. For the most part, people are understanding and want to help you the best that they can."

"Labeling laws are not perfect. There are significant loopholes. Becoming familiar with them is essential," says Malhotra-Kuczabski.

Parents are their child's advocate when it comes to verbalizing the importance of avoidance of the allergen. Sometimes it is difficult for people who are not familiar with food allergies to understand the implications of a child being exposed to a food to which they are allergic.

"Work with others to keep your child safe. It is important to work with school, camp and childcare staff, as well as anyone else who interacts closely with or cares for your child, to discuss food allergy management and how an allergic reaction will be recognized and treated," says Love.

Love also reminds parents that they are not alone. She suggests that parents join a food allergy support group. To find one near you, use FAAN's Support Group Look Up Tool, which can be found at [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org). ❖

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*Janine Boldrin is a freelance writer and mother of three. Her daughter has a milk allergy.*