
KIDDLI-WINKS

WHEN FOOD CAN BE DEADLY

SKIPPING THE PEANUT BUTTER AND SPREADING THE WORD

BY KATIE DRUMMOND

From the terrible twos to the trying teenage years, most parents would agree that raising children is a huge challenge. But parents whose children live with severe food allergies are faced with an added – and often life-threatening – responsibility. Every aspect of these children's lives takes on an additional, complicated dimension.

"I still get nervous, especially at times like Valentine's Day and Hallowe'en, when kids often bring treats containing nuts to school," says Wendy Radzinski, whose 14-year-old daughter, Deborah, has an anaphylactic nut allergy. "For some reason, the radar of otherwise cautious and well-meaning parents is down." Although public elementary schools in Toronto have a "no nuts" policy when it comes to cafeteria foods or homemade lunches, Radzinski says the plan is far from foolproof. "Things slip up, for sure. Last year, one child brought a peanut butter sandwich to school because a parent was forgetful."

For children with food allergies, seemingly minor slip-ups like a peanut butter sandwich can be fatal. Sabrina Shannon, a 13-year-old from Pembroke, Ontario, died in September 2003 after eating French fries in her high school cafeteria. The tongs used to serve the fries had come into contact with cheese curds used to make poutine, causing Sabrina (who had a number of severe allergies, including one to dairy products) to go into anaphylactic shock. The tragedy prompted the Ontario government to institute "Sabrina's Law" in an attempt to take a firmer stance on allergy management in schools.



Lisa Borden and her daughter, Joey. Joey's EpiPen is kept in the pouch that is always around her waist.

Beatrice Povolo, chairperson of the Toronto Anaphylaxis Education Group (affiliated with Anaphylaxis Canada), says that Sabrina's Law, which took effect on January 1, 2006, has made a big difference in how Ontario school boards deal with severe allergies. "After the law came into effect, the public school boards instituted widespread training for teachers, to make sure they could recognize reactions and deal with them appropriately." The training covers first-aid response that includes recognizing the symptoms of severe allergic reactions and handling EpiPen injections. These life-saving needle pens, usually carried at all times by people who have anaphylactic allergies, contain enough epinephrine to temporarily reverse the effects of an anaphylactic reaction until hospital treatment can be administered. The Ontario legislation also requires that school boards implement guidelines aimed at reducing exposure to allergens, as well as provide information sessions and

literature for all parents and students.

Still, Povolo hears mixed reviews from the parents of over a hundred families registered with her Toronto group, which offers support and resources for those coping with anaphylactic allergies, the most common triggers of which – nuts, eggs, seafood and dairy products – can cause life-threatening reactions. "Results around the city are still scattered, and it's not ideal," she remarks. "Some parents are still going into schools constantly to speak to administrators who just don't comprehend the severity of the issue."



Deborah Radzinski, age 14

Radzinski, a registered nurse, takes matters into her own hands by asking Deborah's teachers to practice EpiPen injections on an orange at the start of each school year. Other parents agree on the importance of getting involved to improve allergy management at school.

"My child spends five days a week in this environment, so it needs to be a safe one," says Lisa Borden, whose daughter Joey, 5, also struggles with an allergy to nuts. Last year, Borden designed the calendar for Joey's elementary school and added a "Nut Safe" information page to provide facts and tips about nut allergies to every parent and student.

Communicating the facts within the community at large is vital, as well. Borden relates that, "It's important to take the initiative and work to inform people. The more everyone knows, the more we're all on the same page when it comes to the health and safety of our kids." She adds that her worries about Joey's safety will increase as her daughter gets older and wants to spend more time outside the family home. "Our house is an allergy-free environment for Joey, but when you go into the public, she is immediately at greater risk of reaction."

With many anaphylactic allergies, even trace amounts of an allergen can have serious consequences. These concerns carry over into every play date and birthday party a child with severe allergies attends. "Joey can't just be dropped off, because I can't trust a parent I've never met when there are thirty other kids running around. They need to know how to use an EpiPen and be able to recognize the signs of an allergic reaction," says Borden.

Both Radzinski and Borden have developed strategies to deal with social situations that might make their daughters feel self-conscious. The two suggest baking cupcakes for school events and providing safe treats to parents hosting birthday parties. Still, helping kids fit in isn't always easy, as Borden relates. "I would send Joey to birthday parties with bigger and better cakes than anyone else had, but she always wanted what other kids were eating." She has also started making "No Nuts, Please" t-shirts and handing them out to friends and family, as well as selling them online. She said that being part of a fashion trend has boosted Joey's confidence. "When she sees other people wearing them, she feels like maybe she isn't the only one, and like she isn't so different."

Talking frankly with Deborah has helped her daughter to understand the severity of her allergy, relates Radzinski, and she suggests that families take steps to make the necessary precautions part of daily routines. "When we travel, I always bring a suitcase of safe foods she can eat, and we pick restaurants we know are happy to inform us about the menu. You can't let it run your life, you just need to take it in stride and plan ahead."

Parents of children with severe food allergies often establish a rapport with chefs and restaurateurs to ensure the dishes their children order in their establishments are free of allergens. Many independent restaurants are more than happy to accommodate their customers' dietary requirements and are willing to learn how to do so. When it comes to niche restaurants that cater specifically to a health-conscious – and often vegetarian or vegan – clientele, however, the menu options available often derive much of their protein content from nuts.

It is an unfortunate reality that it is easier to find junk food that is labeled free of nuts than it is to find healthful, nutritious foods that are nut free. "So many packaged, pro-



This is an EpiPen being held in the proper position for injection.

cessed foods are starting to be labeled 'nut free,' but I won't buy them, because I won't feed that to my kids," says Borden.

Radzinski adds that she sets the bar extremely high when it comes to Deborah's safety. She limits travel to family trips where medical care is in close proximity, and emphasizes home cooking instead of trusting packaged products that do not specifically mention peanuts or nuts. Through her diligence, Deborah has never needed to use her EpiPen, although Radzinski worries about Deborah's safety as she gets older. "This year she started middle school with four hundred kids, and the nut-free environment is a lot harder to control in that setting. As she goes out into the world, I just have to hope she stays safe and that I've done my part in making her aware."

Povolo said that all parents whose children are diagnosed with allergies still face an uphill battle when it comes to community awareness. "We've advanced quite a lot, but society does have more work to do," she says. "Of course, I don't expect certain foods to be banned from stores and restaurants, but strategies need to exist to keep everyone safe in public places."

Anaphylaxis Canada, along with its member support groups, is one of several organizations offering hands-on strategies and information for parents hoping to not only protect their kids, but to change how our community deals with allergies. The Hospital for Sick Children, with one of the largest allergy resource networks in Canada, has an entire store selling allergy-

friendly products, as well as support groups that enable families to connect.

"Addressing allergies in schools is a very important step, and one that has seen a lot of progress, but there is more to life than school, and kids will grow up and need to live in workplaces or neighborhoods that may not be so well informed," Povolo says. On a similar note, Borden expresses that, "So many things like cross-contamination wouldn't occur to people unless you spread the knowledge you have. I make sure Joey is aware of what she can and can't do – and I want to spread that to the community, as well."

For now, Povolo asserts that the best families can do is to stay diligent when it comes to ensuring safety and promoting awareness. "Precautions need to be taken, and checks and balances need to be in place, but kids and their families can have a normal life with allergies," she says. "Just keep in mind that the more we inform those around us, the more normal that life can be." □

Katie Drummond is a freelancer, poet, and vegan food lover who is currently pursuing a philosophy degree at Queen's University in Kingston. She has worked as an editor for several campus publications, and recent work can be seen in the Antigonish Review, Diatribe Magazine and Her Active Life. On a good day, she enjoys running, picnics and crossword puzzles.

RESOURCES

Anaphylaxis Canada

Offers support for parents and kids coping with anaphylactic allergies. The group's website provides online resources and tips.

(416) 785-5666

www.anaphylaxis.org

For a list of support groups in your region, go to: www.anaphylaxis.org/content/programs/services_support_list.asp

Sick Kids Specialty Food Shop (The Hospital for Sick Children)

Provides advice and information on nutrition to people living with allergies or food intolerances. Over 400 specialty foods can be ordered online.

(416) 813-5294

www.specialtyfoodshop.com



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