

Suffolk Region

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With another new school year beginning, I felt that it was important to highlight allergy awareness, with an emphasis on food allergy awareness. Although food allergy action month has been historically recognized by New York State PTA in the month of May, parents need to be aware of the dangers of allergies and anaphylaxis amongst children all year long. When a new school year begins, parents tend to focus on school parties, field trips, PTA meetings and events, as well as parties and play dates away from the school. Food allergy reactions can happen in multiple locations throughout the school, and are not limited to the cafeteria. Care must be exercised during bake sales, classroom parties and opportunities for snacking. As a result, parents need to be reminded of the dangers of food allergies in children and to take precautions to ensure that all children are safe.

Researchers estimate that up to 15 million Americans have food allergies, including 5.9 million children under the age of 18. That is about 1 in 13 children, or roughly two in every classroom. About 30 percent of children with food allergies are allergic to more than one food.

<https://www.foodallergy.org/life-food-allergies/food-allergy-101/facts-and-statistics>

Anaphylaxis is defined as follows: a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction resulting from exposure to allergens. Food allergies are the most common cause of anaphylaxis.

National PTA's website features a page entitled, "Anaphylaxis: Be Aware, Prepared and Ready to Respond". It seeks to empower PTA (and non-PTA) parents to help create safer schools. The webpage spotlights a three-part video series which is designed to "help create a safer learning environment for students with severe allergies." The video series' goal is to:

- "Empower parents to partner with schools on education and emergency response.
- Inform parents on how to prepare kids for severe allergies at school and at home.
- Educate parents of kids without severe allergies on anaphylaxis risks in school".

<https://www.pta.org/parents/content.cfm?ItemNumber=3820&navItemNumber=4980>

The New York State Education Department, along with the Department of Health and the New York Statewide School Health Services Center published a document entitled "Making the Difference- Caring for Children with Life Threatening Allergies". Though published in 2008,

the information therein is still very pertinent. Each local board of education was advised to develop a written policy regarding anaphylaxis. The document provides facts and guidance in regards to providing a safe environment and reasonable care for students with life-threatening allergies. The importance of prevention is stressed in the document. Specifically, it is stated as follows:

“The risk of accidental exposure or cross-contamination is always present. However, arrangements should be made at school to reduce the risk of exposure for identified students with severe food allergies.

Although medications, stinging insects, or latex can result in anaphylaxis, most anaphylactic reactions in schools are due to food allergies. School is a high-risk setting for accidental ingestion of a food allergen, due to such factors as the large number of students, increased exposure of the allergic student to food allergens, as well as cross-contamination of tables, desks, and other surfaces. High-risk areas and activities to be given attention are:

- The cafeteria;
- Food sharing;
- Hidden ingredients in art, science, and other projects;
- Bus transportation or other modes of transportation;
- Fund raisers /bake sales;
- Parties and holiday celebrations;
- Field trips;
- Before and after school hours, school sponsored events (co-curricular and afterschool programs); and
- Staff being unaware of the student with an allergy – all staff, including substitute staff, should be made aware of the allergy on a need to know basis.”

Importantly, the document further notes:

“Since many of these activities include a cross-section of the school community (including students without allergies and their parent(s)/guardian(s)), it would be appropriate to educate the school community on life-threatening allergic reactions.”

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/sss/documents/AnaphylaxisFinal62508.pdf>

A common thread in many of the resources cited above is the fact that students without allergies and their parent(s) and/or guardians must be educated on the risks of anaphylaxis. Too many times it has been reported that at a PTA meeting or event, food that contains a common allergen has been served and/or offered for sale. For example, food with nuts, peanuts or peanut butter provided at an evening PTA meeting in the cafeteria may not be appropriately cleaned up after the meeting, thereby potentially exposing allergic children to that allergen, whether by cross-contamination or via a door knob. Similarly, the sale of food or candy at an event containing nuts or peanut butter poses a large risk to people with food allergies. Additionally, on field trips,

many times chaperoning parents have packed their own lunches- which lunches contain food with common allergens. Exposure to allergic children is a risk to be avoided.

A compelling article online from a mom of an allergic child further stresses the issue of education. It is written by Jackie Semmens, and is entitled, "I'm the Allergy Mom, and Yes, I know You're Not Thrilled". The article is an open letter to a "Fellow Parent" of a non allergic child in her child's class. The letter is both witty and serious. It is worth a read. The following few sentences from the article are incredibly compelling:

"Trust me, we've talked to him about the dangers of eating something he's allergic to. I still need you, fellow parent. I can't do this alone. Peanut butter is sticky and it ends up on fingers and door knobs. It ends up on the rim of the juice cup that accidentally gets switched when two kids sit beside each other. It ends up in the belly of a four-year-old who really can't resist just one tiny bite of that Reese's cup cupcake everyone else got but him."

The article also contains some tried and true tips from an allergy parent to a non-allergy parent, including a list of allergy free snacks.

https://www.parent.co/from-the-allergy-mom-thank-you/?utm_campaign=coschedule&utm_source=facebook_page&utm_medium=Parent.co&utm_content=I%27m+the+Allergy+Mom%2C+and+Yes%2C+I+Know+You%27re+Not+Thrilled

It is also important to be aware of the feelings of allergic children. A Newsday/Kidsday article published on June 27, 2017, (written by two children who had peanut allergies), states the following:

"From our experience, having an allergy stinks. When you have a peanut allergy, you can't eat at the same table as your friends or you may have a reaction, depending on how allergic you are to peanuts. You might have a reaction if you eat peanuts, or if you have a more severe case, just being around peanuts is dangerous."

<http://www.newsday.com/lifestyle/family/kidsday/to-beat-peanut-allergy-treatment-or-time-may-help-1.13768221>

Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) is an excellent resource for all information regarding food allergies. It covers everything from symptoms, to diagnosis and testing, to common allergens, to living with food allergies, to education and awareness, to research programs, to epinephrine and more.

<https://www.foodallergy.org/>

Some of the staggering facts on the FARE website are as follows:

“Food Allergy Impacts Quality of Life

- Food allergy limits a major life activity and may qualify an individual for protection under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
- Caring for children with food allergies costs U.S. families nearly \$25 billion annually.
- About 1 in 3 children with food allergy reports being bullied as a result.
- Compared to children who do not have a medical condition, children with food allergy are twice as likely to be bullied”.

<https://www.foodallergy.org/life-food-allergies/food-allergy-101/facts-and-statistics>

All parents should take all of the above information into consideration every year when school begins and in everyday life.