

Safety first at IPS

Increase in nut allergies prompts changes

by Cynthia Ipsaro
IPS PRINCIPAL



Welcome to the 2013/14 school year! Every year schools are faced with new and different challenges that affect the health and safety of our children. This year the Primary School has seen an [increase in life-threatening allergies to peanuts and tree nuts](#). Therefore, it is important we educate our staff, parents, and students about these allergies.

School District nurse Joanne Komos explains the increasing prevalence of peanut/tree nut allergies and what a school community can do to ensure a safe environment.

If you're an adult who doesn't remember food allergies being so prevalent during your own childhood, you're exactly right! Between 1997 and 2007, alone, there was an 18% increase in children under the age of 18 with diagnosed peanut / nut allergies. The numbers tripled in just ten years. Today, they are so common that schools are developing policies to reduce or eliminate any nut products from entering the school buildings!

What exactly is an allergy to peanuts and what is happening to the body during a reaction? Peanuts are among the most common allergy causing foods, and they can often find their way into the most unlikely of foods. Peanuts are not really a "nut" but a legume. However, the proteins in peanuts are similar to the structure of protein found in the tree nut. That is why so often you will see that a person who is allergic to peanuts is also allergic to tree nuts. Examples of tree nuts are: almonds, pecans, cashews, walnuts, hazelnuts, pistachios, macadamia, and Brazil nuts. Everytime a person who is allergic to these foods ingests (or sometimes touches or breathes in) peanuts/nuts their body's immune system detects it as a harmful invader. The immune system is sent into "high gear" and releases the antibodies "immunoglobulin E" IgE, which act to release histamine. The effects of histamine are reflected in symptoms associated with skin, respiratory, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal systems. They can range from mild to severe and can change with each exposure. Symptoms include:

- * Hives and or redness of the skin
- * Itching or tingling in or around the mouth and throat
- * Swelling of the lips, face, throat and skin
- * Tightening of the throat
- * Shortness of breath or wheezing
- * Stomach cramps, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea
- * Feeling of impending doom
- * Anxiety
- * Runny nose

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Anaphylaxis, which is a life-threatening reaction, (which include any or all of the above symptoms that lead to respiratory and cardiac failure) is a medical emergency that requires treatment with an epinephrine (adrenaline) injector and a trip to the Emergency Room. EpiPens and Twinjects, or voice command auto injectors are the way of administering epinephrine in an emergency.

The answer to why these allergies are becoming more prevalent is unknown. Researchers are working on an answer to this question. What can we do as a school community to keep the environment safe for our students with these allergies? Because of the "life-threatening" component of this particular food allergy and that these foods contain oils that can contaminate any surface or contain dust that can be airborne, policies and procedures must be put in place in order to protect any allergic student from critical illness or even death.

The Primary School is not a peanut/tree nut free school, however procedures have been put in place that encourage a safer environment. We have designated three peanut and nut free classrooms and one peanut and nut free lunch table in the cafeteria. Our staff has been trained on how to administer EpiPens safely and have access to each individual child's emergency health care plan. Working together for the best interest of our children is what makes the Primary School the special place that it is!

Thank you for your concern and continued support.