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Holiday Celebrations Add Stress for Parents of Children with Food Allergies

From classroom parties to gatherings with friends and family, expert offers tips to keep kids safe

DENVER, CO -- More than any other time of year, fall and winter offer a succession of holidays that are often food-focused. Starting with Halloween through Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah and Valentine's Day, food is often the centerpiece of many celebrations. While the tradition of serving certain foods at certain times helps to create meaning and memories, it can also make many families uneasy.

"This is a particularly stressful time of year for our patients with food allergies and with good reason," said [B.J. Lanser, MD](#), director of the [Pediatric Food Allergy Program](#) at [National Jewish Health](#) in Denver. "More children than ever have food allergies and in severe cases, just being *around* certain foods can create an extremely dangerous or even fatal situation."

According to a recent [study](#) by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, food allergies among children jumped 50 percent between 1997 and 2011. Today, nearly [6 million](#) children in the United States have some form of food allergy, and young children are affected most often.

"Just one bite of an allergenic food can cause life-threatening anaphylaxis," said Lanser. "Even if a child doesn't eat the food, odors and cross-contamination can pose a serious risk, as well."

[Cross-contamination](#) occurs when protein from one food is transferred to another, either directly or indirectly. Removing peanuts from the top of a dessert, for example, does not mean all peanut residue is gone. The dish is likely still dangerous to those allergic to peanuts. Indirect cross-contamination can occur, for example, when the same knife is used to cut different dishes without thoroughly washing the utensil between uses.

"With all of our patients, we stress being prepared and having a plan in place for how to deal with those surprises," said Lanser. Here are 6 tips to help head off any holiday hazards you may encounter.

- **No epinephrine, don't eat** – The most important tip is to never go anywhere without epinephrine. "It is the only lifesaving medicine we have for anaphylaxis, so it's vital that we always have it on hand," said Lanser. If you or your child forgets to carry an epinephrine injector, do not eat anything you didn't bring or food with any unknown ingredients. "Epinephrine

saves lives,” said Dr. Lanser. “If you forget to bring the epinephrine, it may mean your child won’t be able to fully enjoy the get together, but it’s not worth risking anaphylaxis.”

- **Stock up on epinephrine** - Dr. Lanser suggests keeping two doses of epinephrine on hand. “What we find is that many times parents or adults panic in the heat of the moment, and don’t administer the drug properly the first try. Having a backup is always a good idea.” During the holidays, parents should also check expiration dates on their epinephrine and stock up on a fresh supply, particularly if you are heading out of town for the holidays.
- **RSVP, A.S.A.P.** - If your child is invited to a party this holiday season, get in touch with the host or hostess early on to let them know about your child’s food restrictions. “It’s a good idea to talk with those who are throwing the party or even provide them with a written list of foods to which your child may react,” said Lanser. Even if your child doesn’t eat the food that’s being served, it’s important to let the host know that the mere presence of certain foods may be an issue.
- **Pre-pack a similar snack** - To make sure your child feels included, pre-pack a safe snack similar to those being served at the party. “If the rest of the children are having cake or cookies, sending your child with carrots and broccoli can really make them feel isolated,” said Lanser. He suggests talking to the host to see what kinds of foods are being served, then sending your child with allergy-safe cookies or bake-and-take pizza, for example, so they don’t stand out or feel left out.
- **Play host** - The safest way to control what’s on the menu is to host the party yourself. Be sure to include information on the party invitation, however, that there will be allergy restrictions that need to be observed. “Let your guests know that you will take care of the menu, and ask them to bring non-food items, like drinks, plates or games for the kids to play,” said Lanser.
- **Keep all original packaging** - Whether you’re hosting or attending a party with those who have food allergies, be sure all the original packaging in which foods were purchased is available. “Often, we like to buy foods, take them out of the original packaging and display them in decorative bowls or on festive trays,” said Lanser. That may help with the party atmosphere, but it can cause a lot of concern for those with food allergies. “Our patients and their parents are quite good at reading labels to determine what is and isn’t safe, so be sure to save all the original packaging to allow them the opportunity to review it.”

“It’s really all about being prepared,” said Lanser. “This time of year you’re so busy doing other things and getting ready for the holidays, make sure you take some time to pre-plan for food allergy emergencies. It will help keep your kid safe and make the season much merrier,” he said.

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