

# Food allergies and Anaphylaxis – INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

This information has been developed collaboratively by the NSW Department of Education and Communities, NSW Department of Health, the Catholic Education Commission of NSW and the Association of Independent Schools of NSW.

## How common are anaphylactic reactions to foods?

The majority of food allergic and anaphylactic reactions occur in preschool age children. Most food reactions, even to highly allergenic foods such as peanuts are not anaphylactic. Deaths from anaphylaxis are rare.<sup>1</sup> Teenagers are more at risk of death; rarely do deaths from anaphylaxis occur in young children.

## Is a child at risk likely to have a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) through casual contact with an allergen on surfaces, other children's hands or by smelling the food?

No. Severe reactions from casual contact are extremely rare. Studies<sup>2</sup> have shown that placing peanut butter on the skin did not cause any severe reactions in a group of peanut allergic children.

## Is the child at risk of anaphylaxis likely to have a severe reaction if another child brings food to school that contains the known allergen?

Unless the child at risk of anaphylaxis shares or trades the food of others, the risk of anaphylaxis is negligible.

## What does the 'may contain' statement mean on food packaging and is it safe to have these products in school?

The 'may contain' statement is voluntary information provided by the manufacturer in order to inform the consumer that the product may have been inadvertently contaminated during the manufacturing process. It does not necessarily mean that the product will contain the allergen (*this information is on the ingredient list*). Some children who are at risk of anaphylaxis eat the products that have the 'may contain' statement while others do not. Products with the 'may contain' statement do not need to be removed from the school or the school canteen.

## What can schools do?

School communities should take steps to identify the risks associated with anaphylaxis and implement practical, age appropriate strategies to minimise exposure to known allergens. For more information go to <http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/studenthealth/conditions/anaphylaxis/index.php>

## Do schools need to ban foods?

No. Banning of foods or food products is not recommended. There is a lack of evidence to suggest that banning a food from a school is helpful in reducing the risk of anaphylaxis<sup>3</sup>. Schools are encouraged to become aware of the risks associated with anaphylaxis and implement strategies to minimise exposure to known allergens.

## What about nuts?

As one strategy to minimise exposure to nuts, schools may decide in consultation with their community to ask families not to bring nuts or nut products to the school site or to school activities.

While this is an acceptable strategy to reduce the risk of exposure to known allergens, it is never possible to guarantee a school site is nut free.

It is important that schools do not claim they are 'nut or peanut free'. Such a claim could not reliably be made and, if made, may lead to a false sense of security about exposure to peanuts and peanut products.

## Can schools use peanuts or peanut products in curricular or extracurricular activities?

To minimise the risk of exposure to a high risk allergen, all schools should avoid the use of peanuts, peanut butter or other peanut products in curricular or extracurricular activities. They should also review curriculum materials to make sure that they do not advocate the use of peanuts, peanut butter or other peanut products. For more information please go to

<http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/secondary/technology/safety/faqs/food.htm>

## Are there food prevention measures specific to preschool students?

Yes. Preschools are advised to see Section 5 of the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergies (ASCIA) *Guidelines for the Prevention of Food Anaphylactic Reactions in Schools, Preschools and Childcare*. The guide can be accessed from the ASCIA website at <http://www.allergy.org.au/content/view/31/258/>

## What precautions can parents take to help keep children at risk of anaphylaxis, safe?

All parents can encourage their child to avoid sharing or trading food and eating utensils. Encouraging children to wash their hands after eating may also be helpful to avoid mild allergy symptoms such as a skin rash. It is also helpful to tell children to get help from a teacher or other adult if another child looks unwell, even if they do not know what is wrong with them. Older children can be taught about food allergies and anaphylaxis at appropriate times and of ways they can support their peers to avoid risk foods and to be safe.

## Where can I obtain more information on food allergies?

ASCIA *Guidelines for the Prevention of Food Anaphylactic Reactions in Schools, Preschools and Childcare* available at <http://www.allergy.org.au/content/view/31/258/>  
<http://www.allergyfacts.org.au/>

1 Liew et al Anaphylaxis fatalities and admissions in Australia. J ALLERGY CLIN IMMUNOL FEB 2009

2 Simonte et al relevance of casual contact with peanut butter in children with peanut allergy. J ALLERGY CLIN IMMUNOL JULY 180-182

3 ASCIA Guidelines for the Prevention of Food Anaphylactic Reactions in Schools, Preschools and Childcare