

## **Food Allergies and Anaphylaxis - Information for Schools**

The following information aims to answer frequently asked questions about preventing food allergic and anaphylactic reactions.

### **What is anaphylaxis?**

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction which can be life threatening. Anaphylaxis is most commonly caused by peanuts, tree nuts, egg, milk, sesame and seafood as well as medications and insect stings.

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. An Australian survey of over 4000 children indicated that more than 90% of anaphylactic food reactions occurred in preschool age children. Deaths from anaphylaxis are rare. Teenagers are more at risk of death; rarely do deaths from anaphylaxis occur in young children.

### **Frequently asked questions**

- **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. Recent studies<sup>1</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 precautions can parents take to help keep children at risk of anaphylaxis safe?**

Awareness is one of the most important things.

All parents can encourage their child to avoid sharing or trading food and sharing 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.

- **Do we need to ban foods from the school?**

A ban on peanuts and peanut products within the school is not required but may be agreed to by a school and its community.

If a school does decide to ban peanuts or peanut products it should nevertheless not claim to be "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.

There is no scientific evidence to suggest that banning a food from a school is helpful in reducing the risk of anaphylaxis.

Further information on the prevention of food anaphylactic reactions can be accessed from the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCI) Guidelines for prevention of food anaphylactic reactions in schools, pre-schools and childcare. See Section 4 of the guidelines for information specific to school age children. In this guide, there is no recommendation to place blanket bans on certain food groups.

When parents make requests to ban foods written documentation of this request should be sought from the student's medical practitioner.

To minimise the risk of exposure to a high risk allergen, schools should avoid the use of peanuts, peanut butter or other peanut products in curricular or extra-curricular 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 further information schools should go to the relevant website:**

**Government schools:**

[www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/studenthealth/conditions/anaphylaxis/index.php](http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/studenthealth/conditions/anaphylaxis/index.php)

**Catholic schools:**

[www.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au](http://www.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au) (publications link)

**Independent schools AIS**

[www.aisnsw.edu.au/Main/DocumentsandLinks/tabid/388/Default.aspx](http://www.aisnsw.edu.au/Main/DocumentsandLinks/tabid/388/Default.aspx)

**Where else can I get further information on food allergies?**

ASCI 'Guidelines for prevention of food anaphylactic reactions in schools, preschools and child care centres' June 2004 available on [www.allergy.org.au](http://www.allergy.org.au)

References

<sup>1</sup> Simonte et al Relevance of casual contact with peanut butter in children with peanut allergy. J ALLERGY CLIN IMMUNOL JULY 2003 180-182

