

Food Allergy

More Than Words: Helping teens with food allergies gain confidence in social situations

By Erin Malawer

Teenagers and young adults with food allergies are often at a higher risk of a severe allergic reaction than other age groups. Why?

Adolescents tend to shy away from mentioning their food allergies - especially to peers — and they often intentionally leave their emergency medication at home. Risk-taking behavior is also part of the teenage brain. When hormonal changes, a desire to fit in and peer pressure are combined with food allergies, innocent situations can turn life-threatening.

What can parents do?

Talk with your teen about food allergies and involve them in problem solving. Importantly, give them language to use to avoid putting themselves at risk. Armed with a variety of ways to deal with social situations, teenagers are better prepared to self-advocate and speak up when it matters.

Here are some scenarios teens with food allergies often face in social situations, with suggested replies. Practice these responses or create new ones. Deliver the lines with humor or sarcasm; be nonchalant or matter-of-fact. Make them work so your child can confidently navigate tricky social situations.

Situation: You're hanging out at a friend's house. "Mmm," says your friend. "Try this brownie. It's so good. I think it's nut-free. Have some!"

Reply: "That does look good! Thanks for offering, but I can't try it without an ingredient list. We make the best safe donuts at my house. Want to come over and try one?"

Situation: You feel embarrassed to ask food allergy-related questions at a restaurant in front of your friends.

Reply: "Hey, I need to call the restaurant about my food allergy before we get there — I have to ask the manager a few questions." Or, if you're already at the restaurant, "Hey, I'm going to need to ask a bunch of food allergy questions and show the wait staff my chef card. Do you want to order first?"

Situation: You're at a friend's house and your friend's mom offers to get you something to eat. "I'll grab you guys a snack!" she says, with no further description.

Reply: "Thank you for offering, but I have a food allergy. I brought my own snack — all I need is a bowl/spoon/fork."

Situation: You're going on a date - but you have food allergy concerns about the ice cream shop your date suggested.

Reply: "I'm actually allergic to milk. Would you mind if we go play mini-golf instead?" Some other activity-based dates: bowling, going to watch your school's football or basketball game, or seeing a band.

87% of parents that believe children are bullied due to food allergies think that if food allergy bullying happens, it would most likely take place in school*

No Appetite for Bullying

Bullying is never acceptable, but food allergy bullying — which happens when children and teens with food allergies are teased, ridiculed or even threatened or assaulted with food to which they are severely allergic — is particularly dangerous. Learn more about the prevalence and potential dangers of food allergy bullying at NoAppetiteForBullying.com.

Erin Malawer is the founder of AllergyStrong, an organization dedicated to supporting low-income families living with food allergies. Read Erin's blog at shmallergy.wordpress.com.

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