

life & style

By Steff Sanchez, 19/08/2009 07:04

Living with a severe allergy

Allergies do not just mean avoiding certain foods or dealing with the odd rash. In some severe cases, allergies can dictate a person's life and putting a foot wrong can have life-threatening consequences. To highlight National Allergy Week (May 19-23) we spoke to one woman about how she learned to deal with the severe allergy anaphylaxis.



Fork poised to mouth, I dig in and take a bite. Within seconds, I know that it is going to be a very awful day. It starts with a tickle of the back of the throat, a slight swelling of the tongue. I feel a lump develop as I start to swallow. It's time to put down the fork and pick up the phone: "I need an ambulance".

In rolling the genetic-dice, I was lucky in many respects. However, my parents passed on a possibly fatal trait: I have an anaphylactic allergy to nuts (and oddly enough, to peaches). What does this mean? Anaphylaxis occurs when the body's immune system takes a typically harmless substance (such as food or a bee sting) and attacks it. The skin itches and puffs up; uncomfortable for sure. More seriously, blood pressure drops dangerously low and the airways start to swell shut. Without medical treatment, a sufferer could be dead in minutes. This is a fate that I have been lucky to escape more than once.

Travel

Examine the contents of your pockets or purse. What can't you leave home without? Is it your bank card, maybe a set of house keys? Why not try an auto-injecting 0.3 mg shot of adrenaline? Anaphylaxis is no joke and if caught in an emergency my Epi-Pen is my best friend. Epinephrine, commonly known as adrenaline, is used to suppress the immune system and combat the reaction to the allergen.

12 heart stopping foods

Once a reaction is triggered, I shoot myself in the thigh before rushing to the emergency room for medical care. Time is essential, and in a crisis I need easy access to my shot. Not only do I always keep one on my person, I have ones stashed at my boyfriend's flat, my kitchen and my car. When on holiday, I bring two extras in my suitcase. Believe me, it is better to be over prepared than caught in an emergency without a lifeline.

Shopping

I am a label reader. A thorough label reader. While caloric intake is important, it is honestly not my most pressing concern. Ingredients are more important as a consumer with allergies. If I miss a beat, I could earn myself a trip to the emergency room. Even when purchasing familiar brands, it is important to re-check the package every time I stop by the market. Products may change their ingredients without warning, (i.e. "Great New Taste!") and it is important to be informed. Luckily, store bought food is packaged with helpful allergy warnings. Not only does it list common triggers such as nuts, wheat and milk, but even food processed on the same machinery will be labelled as "not suitable". Cross contamination can be a problem, so it is important to read every bit of information.

Dating

One place that my allergy me hardest is in my love life. Not that I am interested, but random snogs are thoroughly off-limits. Believe me, explaining the whole "I could die if you've been snacking on nuts" bit is not only embarrassing, it is surely a buzz kill. Personally, I would rather play it safe with my health than let some lecherous could-be liar have their way. Luckily, I have a long-term boyfriend that understands.

Fats: good vs bad

I will never make him choose between me and a tin of almonds. However, he understands that if he does indulge, I won't come within ten feet - and definitely no hugs and kisses unless he's thoroughly washed his hands and

brushed his teeth. And rinsed with mouthwash. I am not exaggerating when I say that people have literally died from contaminated smooches.

Eating out

Eating out also becomes problematic. Food options are limited (as both a vegetarian and a nut-allergy sufferer) and restaurants are not always as responsible as they should be. Even if you put it bluntly, there is no guarantee that I won't be mortally wounded from pine-nut infested marinara sauce. Believe me, it's happened. I actually broke up my older sister's high school graduation celebration with a trip to the hospital after a negligent waiter "promised" that he asked the chef about nut content.

Alternative choices

It was only a few months ago, midway through my twentieth year on this earth, that I ate my first peanut butter and jelly sandwich. No, I did not discover a miracle drug that spared my lungs from shutting down. The solution was something entirely simpler: sunflower-seed based spread. Virtually identical in texture (including whole kernels for the "chunky" variety) and taste, this is a product that literally brought tears to my eyes. As a little girl, I was forced to watch the other kids enjoying their sandwiches, feeling slighted by my genetic fate. No more.

The rise of liquid foods

As allergy awareness increases, substitutes for the fatal foods are now flooding the market. Soy and sunflower-based products are excellent alternatives to everything from peanut products (such as oil and peanut butter) to milk.

Advocacy

In the end, it is my own responsibility to be my own allergy advocate. Since I was very young, I have been responsible for being aware of my environment. I double-check what I am about to eat, leaving it alone if there is any doubt. I let those that I am living with know immediately that they have to be careful. Leaving walnut remains on the counter after cooking is simply not an option. If I fail to speak up, there could be deadly consequences. Moreover, I teach everyone that will be spending a lot of time with me, be it flatmate or friend, how to use an epinephrine shot. If an allergy leaves me unexpectedly unconscious, I need them to know the best way to help save my life.

As more people become aware of anaphylaxis, I find my life getting gradually easier. It is not only simpler to identify products that use nuts, but also to find dietary alternatives to fill in the gap. Acquaintances are less frequently insulted when I refuse homemade baked goods, understanding what I mean when I say "anaphylaxis". I've figured out how to keep myself safe, and learned to accept my allergy. Even though I am an allergy sufferer doesn't mean I have to suffer.

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