

Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America

Previous page : [Nation adapts food habits to cater for allergic kids](#) [Print](#)

Nation adapts food habits to cater for allergic kids

By Lorraine Heller

10/29/2007- **The proliferation of food allergies over the past few decades has resulted in sweeping changes to the American way of life as avoidance strategies are increasingly adopted across the nation, according to a report in *Newsweek*.**

Published in the November 5 cover, *Kids and the Growing Food Allergy Threat* says that although there are some positive signs that developments in science could lead to a certain level of allergy resistance, avoidance currently remains the only safe option, and the nation is adapting accordingly.

Twenty years ago, for example, peanut butter was put out for all children in some away-from-home camps. Now, nut products will likely not be used in camp dining rooms, and dairy-free options will be available for those children who cannot eat dairy products.

"Dairy-free birthday cakes are de rigueur these days, as are no-peanut Halloween parties," reports author Claudia Kalb.

Many schools have implemented 'peanut-free' zones, and allergy-emergency plans; some states have implemented allergy guidelines for schools, or required allergy education for all kids; teachers and bus drivers have been trained how to use an EpiPen, the emergency treatment necessary for severe reactions.

Such levels of fear and precaution have also resulted in many parents keeping their children from eating certain foods because they wrongly believe they are allergic to these. According to Dr David Fleischer of the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, around 25 percent of parents think their children may have a food allergy, but these have only been confirmed in some eight percent.

Labeling of allergens has also tightened up following the implementation of new regulations last year that require the labeling in simple language of eight major food allergens - milk, egg, peanut, tree nut, fish, shellfish, wheat and soy.

However, as FoodNavigator-USA.com reported in February, one of the side effects of more stringent legislation has been a surge in the dubious 'May Contain' labeling. These warnings started with the very best intentions from the industry: a greater understanding of allergens led to a heightened sense of responsibility to indicate any measure of doubt.

But this is a point where consumers and manufacturers simply do not understand each other. Manufacturers feel they are being responsible, while consumers feel they are opting for a legal cop-out. As a result, the labels are mistrusted and often ignored.

The *Newsweek* report confirms this, citing a study published in July, which found that even parents of kids with allergies are increasingly ignoring 'may contain' labels; 75 percent of parents said they

paid attention to them in supermarkets, compared with 85 percent in 2003.

Other recent studies have focused on the developments in science that could lead to treating, curing, or even preventing food allergies.

In one study, children allergic to peanuts are being given tiny amounts of peanut flour to see if they can build up tolerance. In another, funded by the Consortium of Food Allergy Research (coFAR), a five-year \$17m initiative launched in 2005 by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, researchers will give peanut-allergic adults small doses of an engineered peanut protein to ward off reactions and possibly eliminate the problem. The idea is ultimately to have a peanut-allergy vaccine, states *Newsweek*.

Another study by scientists at King's College London has found that children are more likely to develop peanut allergies in countries where the avoidance of peanuts is recommended in early childhood - like the United States. In Asian and African countries, where children eat peanut-containing products from a very young age, the incidence of peanut allergies is much lower.

Professor Gideon Lack of King's College London is now conducting another study to determine if certain allergies can be prevented. He has enrolled over 200 babies with eczema or egg allergies - but no known peanut allergies - half of which will be given peanut-containing snacks, while the other half will avoid peanuts. He will then follow them until age five to determine whether peanut allergies may have been stopped before taking hold.

A food allergy occurs when the immune system mistakenly believes that a harmless substance is harmful. In its attempt to protect the body, the immune system creates IgE antibodies specific to that food. The next time the individual eats that food, the immune system releases massive amounts of chemicals and histamines in order to protect the body, thereby triggering allergic symptoms.

According to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), despite the attention given to peanut allergies, the most widespread allergy suffered by Americans is that of fish and seafood, in particular salmon and shrimp, which effects around 6.5 million people - mainly adults - in the US. This is twice as many people as those affected by allergies to peanuts and tree nuts.

More than 170 foods have been identified as allergens, including fruits, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, poppy seeds, mollusks, peas, lentils, and beans other than green beans.