

Peanut Allergies

Q & A with Dr. Michael Young

Dr. Young: Hi, I'm Dr. Michael Young. I'm an allergist, and I take care of children with food allergies. I'm also the author of the Peanut Allergy Answer Book, which is written for families and answers the most common questions about peanut allergy. I work at Boston Children's Hospital.

Q : My son was just diagnosed with a peanut allergy. What do I do now?

Dr. Young: My advice for parents of children with newly diagnosed peanut allergy is to first of all stay calm. Ask your doctor a lot of questions. Get reliable sources of information. With that information, you and your family then can form a plan to keep your child safe. I find it helpful for families to actually write down your plan, and that way you can have a constant reminder of what you need to do and what you need to be prepared for. So with a plan in place, with knowledge and education, with preparedness for dealing with emergency situations, your child will be safe and will be secure and will be able to lead a normal, fulfilling life.

Q : How can I tell if my son is having an allergic reaction?

Dr. Young: Typically, allergic symptoms are associated with itchiness, rashes such as hives, swelling, trouble breathing, sometimes gastrointestinal upset, diarrhea. Rarely, there can be life-threatening symptoms such as trouble breathing or a drop in blood pressure resulting in collapse. These are all symptoms that typically occur within a few minutes of the actual food ingestion, so it's important to recognize these symptoms so that treatment can be started promptly, and this can be with Benadryl or the EpiPen auto-injector.

Q : Could my son get a reaction from touching or smelling peanuts?

Dr. Young: When you have peanut allergy, it's very important to avoid the allergen. Life-threatening reactions are caused primarily by oral contact such as eating the food. Casual contact such as skin contact and exposure to the smell or inhalation do not cause life-threatening reactions. These reactions are typically very mild, might involve runny nose,

sneezing, itchy eyes, similar to the reaction you might get if you were allergic to cats and you're exposed to a cat.

Q : What should I do at home to make sure that my son is safe?

Dr. Young: I don't generally recommend that you ban peanuts from the household if you're able to control the child's contact with peanuts, and that's accomplished by keeping all the foods that contain peanuts stored away safely out of your child's reach, cleaning table surfaces, cleaning utensils and food preparation tools, pots and pans, and also being prepared with medications in the event that your child has an accidental exposure and has a bad reaction. The presence of peanut in the home will not jeopardize your child's health unless he or she actually eats the peanut product.

Q : How do I work with my son's school regarding his allergy?

Dr. Young: A child's management in school is not unlike a child's management at home. I recommend that every child with peanut allergies have a written action plan that prevents food allergy exposures in the classroom as well as an emergency plan for what to do if your child has an allergic reaction and needs treatment. Your child definitely should have all his medications, such as antihistamines and the epinephrine, with the school nurse, and this plan is something that you, your doctor, the school nurse and other school staff all can contribute to. If there ever is a problem in the school setting, your child will be safe and well cared for.

Q : What should my son tell his friends about his allergy?

Dr. Young: Your child with a peanut allergy can explain to his or her friends what allergies are all about. They can explain that if they eat peanuts or things that contain peanuts, they can get very sick. Your child can explain what the symptoms are and what they need to do to help them. Most of all, your child should tell his or her friends that although they are a little bit different, they can still be very normal as long as they don't come in contact with the peanuts.

Q : If my son has this allergy, what other things should I be aware of?

Dr. Young: Unfortunately, bullying is very common in schools, and children with food allergies are often the object of bullies.

One recent study showed that 50% of parents with food-allergic children were unaware that their child was being bullied. This is very important for you to know. Talk to your child frequently. If your child is unhappy for no apparent reason, he or she may be bullied. Bullying has to be stopped promptly in the school setting, and you need to act on it as soon as you realize that that's happening.

Q : Can my son outgrow his allergy?

Dr. Young: Peanut allergy was once thought to be a life-long affliction, but many studies now show that approximately 20% of children can actually outgrow peanut allergy by six years of age.

Q : Are there any new treatments for peanut allergies?

Dr. Young: Food allergy research is very dynamic now, and there are a lot of promising treatments under investigation. One of the recent developments has been oral desensitization, where the food allergen is introduced to the food-allergic person in very small amounts and then increased under medical supervision. These studies look very promising. Another interesting treatment under investigation are Chinese herbal formula, which is being investigated to look at treating people with all food allergies, not just peanut allergy. There is a lot of cause of optimism even if you have severe food allergies, and we will find a good way to treat and even cure this problem in the future.

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