

Food Allergies: Avoiding a Recipe for Disaster

While spending the day with her grandmother, one-year-old Natalie Kalitsi suddenly began acting strangely. First the little girl grew very sleepy; then red blotches broke out all over her body. She seemed to struggle to breathe. An ambulance rushed her to the hospital, where doctors questioned her grandmother: What had Natalie eaten that day?

Nothing unusual—but Natalie did have her first bite of fish. That small bite of fish was enough to almost kill her.

Today Natalie is an active, happy three-year-old with big brown eyes. Like other toddlers, she loves going to preschool, playgrounds, and birthday parties. But wherever Natalie goes, a special shot that contains powerful medicine always follows. If Natalie accidentally eats seafood, peanuts, or dairy products—all of which give her allergic reactions—the shot will help her breathe until she can be taken to a hospital.

“At first it was hard getting used to, but it’s routine now,” says Gale Kalitsi, Natalie’s mother. “Everywhere Natalie goes, I pack a special lunch box for her—it’s like a game. We even do it at birthday parties—or when she goes to her cousin’s house.”

All parents try to look out for their child’s safety, but being the mother of a severely allergic child means that Gale must be extra careful. Before Natalie began to attend a preschool near her home in Bethesda, Maryland, Gale called meetings with her teachers and the school’s director to make sure that they understood how serious allergies can be.

“Until you have an experience with food allergies, you don’t know how deadly allergies can be,” says Gale. “In Natalie’s case, it can close down her air passages and kill her. Everyone who comes in contact with her needs to be able to read food labels. And because children like to share food, or they may kiss her and have peanuts on their lips, we need to be especially careful.”

So a special rule was set for Natalie’s classroom: No students could bring in peanut-butter sandwiches for lunch.

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By now, Gale is an expert at reading the labels of everything Natalie eats, but in the beginning food labels were filled with confusing words. For example, Natalie is allergic to milk, but how could Gale know that many unfamiliar-sounding ingredients such as “casein” or “whey” contained milk? Gale says that an organization called the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (1-800-929-4040) has been an enormous help and has even provided her with special note cards listing ingredients that aren’t safe for Natalie.

Gale and her husband have learned so much about food allergies that when their second daughter was diagnosed with an allergy to wheat, they felt confident of their ability to handle her special needs. “You really need to become an educator and a campaigner for your child,” says Gale.

But Gale and her husband recently learned they’re not the only ones watching Natalie’s diet. Now that Natalie is growing up, she can speak up for herself.

“At the age of three, Natalie can tell you what foods make her sick, and she can tell you what she can have,” says Gale proudly.