

# Taking Action to Build Food-Safe Schools

Action  
Sheet

## Managing Food Allergies

**A** food allergy is an exaggerated immune response to a specific food, referred to as a food allergen. Although the immune system normally protects us from germs, in individuals with food allergies this system mistakenly responds to a food as if it is harmful. When exposed to a food allergen, the immune system of an allergic person makes a protein called IgE antibody. This protein alerts cells to release powerful chemicals, such as histamine, that cause symptoms that can affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin, or cardiovascular system, and can lead to a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis. Although more than 170 foods are known to cause a food allergy, in the United States, eight foods – milk, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, wheat, soy, peanuts, and tree nuts – account for 90 percent of these allergies.

Food allergies are a growing food safety and public health concern in schools that affect an estimated 4-6% of children in the United States. Studies indicate that 16-18 % of children with food allergies have had a reaction from accidentally eating food allergens while at school. In addition, 25% of the severe and potentially life-threatening reactions (anaphylaxis) reported at schools happened in children with no previous diagnosis of food allergy.<sup>1</sup> Currently, there are no treatments available for preventing food allergies; the key to managing food allergies is to avoid exposure to food allergens. However, avoidance is not always easy or possible, and accidental reactions to foods, including anaphylaxis, can occur in school.

It is important for your school district to develop and carry out policies and procedures to manage food allergies which may include educating staff, parents, and teachers about food allergies; preventing exposure to food allergens; and responding quickly and effectively to a child experiencing a reaction.

### Food-Safe Schools Action Steps and Resources

1. Educate yourself and your staff about food allergies.
  - The USDA FNS and NFSMI have developed a variety of food allergy resources for child nutrition professionals including food allergen fact sheets, videos, and a comprehensive training curriculum.  
[www.nfsmi.org/foodallergy](http://www.nfsmi.org/foodallergy)
2. Collaborate with other school community members to develop and implement a written food allergy management plan for each school in your district. A variety of resources are available to help you craft a plan, including:
  - *The Food Allergy Book: What School Employees Need to Know*, developed by the USDA FNS and the National Education Association Health Information Network (NEA HIN), provides information in English and Spanish about food allergies and allergic reactions at school. It helps school employees identify the most common foods that might trigger an allergic reaction; the signs and symptoms of a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction, anaphylaxis; and their role in helping to manage food allergies in schools.  
[www.neahin.org/educator-resources/foodallergybook.html](http://www.neahin.org/educator-resources/foodallergybook.html)
  - The CDC *Voluntary Guidelines for Managing Food Allergies in Schools and Early Care and Education Programs* provide a framework to build strong partnerships among families, medical providers, and staff in schools to help children overcome the challenges that come from having a food allergy. The guidelines also call for strong leadership in schools, comprehensive plans for protecting students with food allergies, and effective responses to food allergy emergencies.

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[www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/foodallergies/pdf/13\\_243135\\_A\\_Food\\_Allergy\\_Web\\_508.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/foodallergies/pdf/13_243135_A_Food_Allergy_Web_508.pdf)

- As part of your action plan, give employees specific guidance on how to respond to a child's allergic reaction and provide immediate emergency care. Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) offers an emergency care plan template that can be used as a starting point.

[www.foodallergy.org/faap](http://www.foodallergy.org/faap) ■

Food intolerances, such as lactose intolerance, are often confused with food allergies because both can result in cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or other gastrointestinal symptoms. Food intolerance involves the digestive system, while a food allergy involves the immune system. Food intolerances are generally not life-threatening, unlike food allergies, which can cause severe, life-threatening reactions.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Voluntary Guidelines for Managing Food Allergies in Schools and Early Care and Education Programs. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services; 2013.



Accommodations and substitutions to school meals for children must be made, at no additional cost, when a licensed physician considers a food allergy or intolerance a disability. Disabilities are defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008 broadened the definition of disabilities to encompass more impairments that limit Major Life Activities. The USDA issued Guidance Related to the ADA Amendments Act (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/SP36-2013os.pdf>). The USDA also issued guidance for school nutrition staff to address how accommodations should be handled: Accommodating Children with Special Dietary Needs in the School Nutrition Programs. Each state's administering agency for USDA's Child Nutrition Programs (known commonly as the State Agency) provides support tools for accommodating special dietary needs. [www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/special\\_dietary\\_needs.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/special_dietary_needs.pdf)