



Asthma and Allergy
Foundation of America®

TEXAS CHAPTER

FOOD ALLERGIES: FOCUS ON PEANUTS

Approximately one out of every hundred and fifty people has a peanut allergy. The allergy can range from mild to deadly. Peanuts aren't nuts, they're legumes, from the bean family, like peas and green beans. **Some people (1 in 20) who have peanut allergy are also allergic to peas and green beans.** If a child with peanut allergy has been eating these beans with no reactions, most doctors will advise to continue eating them, but if a child with peanut allergy has never eaten peas or green beans, some physicians will take the 5% risk factor into account and advise not to eat those legumes, either.

Mild Symptoms of peanut allergy might include an itchy mouth, hives, swelling, breathing problems like throat tightening or wheezing, stomach pains or vomiting. **Severe Symptoms** affect blood circulation and the heart, resulting in fainting or even heart failure. These are the symptoms which can cause death.

Peanut allergy, like most food allergy, isn't restricted to children. Some patients can have a severe reaction if they eat only 1 peanut, while someone else may be able to eat 7-9 peanuts without any reaction. **Peanut allergies are unpredictable.** Two people with the same level of allergy can react differently to the same exposure, and even have different reactions at different times. It's rare for someone to have a severe reaction from just smelling peanut butter but they might have a reaction from opening a pack of airline peanuts and inhaling the "powder." Some might have a severe reaction through cross-contamination, contact or touch alone. Since peanut allergy is unpredictable it's **important for schools to take steps against cross-contamination by washing lunch tables with hot, soapy water after mealtime.**

There are several possible causes for acquiring a peanut allergy: 1) a family history with general allergies 2) having asthma, eczema or hay fever 3) an over-active immune system. The immune system is designed to fight off infections; sometimes the system mistakenly fights harmless proteins like those in peanuts and that's when an allergy may occur. No studies have shown conclusively that women who eat **peanuts during pregnancy** are responsible for a peanut allergy in their children, although some doctors recommend that a high-risk pregnant woman (both she and her husband have allergies even if not to peanuts) should avoid eating peanuts in the last three months of pregnancy. Some doctors also recommend not giving babies peanut products before age 3 but there is no solid evidence that this will cause or prevent an allergy to peanuts.

A child with peanut allergy has a 7% chance that a younger sibling may also have peanut allergy, so many physicians recommend testing the younger child before giving them peanut products. The age to test is determined by the doctor; many think it's ok to wait to test until just before starting school if they are never exposed to peanuts before then.

The **best way to treat peanut allergies** is still to avoid all products that contain peanuts: peanuts, peanut butter, peanut oils, candies with peanuts, etc. When eating out, ALWAYS ask management or kitchen staff if peanut oils (often used in Asiatic cooking) are used. The next step is to have emergency medication, epinephrine auto-injectors, available for immediate use if there is a severe allergic reaction. Some studies are also being done on a new drug which provides anti-IGE to stop an allergic reaction. Not a peanut specific drug, at this time it's been tested in children over age 12 but more time is needed to do more studies.

New food labeling laws effective Jan. 1, 2006 require the inclusion of the most common and severe food allergens: look for "hidden" peanut products in foods. New labeling also mentions what other products are produced at that manufacturer's facility. Many commercial bakeries use the same machines to make various cookies, with peanuts and without, so there is always danger of cross-contamination. For safety, look for suppliers who limit their products to non-allergenic products.

The Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America, Texas Chapter
9101 Quarter Horse Lane * Ft. Worth, TX 76123 * 817-297-3132 * 888-933-2232 * info@aafatexas.org

The information provided is for reference only and is not a substitute for professional medical care.