

Nutrition News

Department of Human Nutrition

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Traveling with Food Allergies

Travel today is difficult enough without having to contend with food allergies. Whatever the mode of transportation — flying, sailing, or driving — careful planning and preparation are essential for a fun, successful trip.

Approximately 1.5 million people in the United States suffer from peanut allergies alone. An estimated half of them are also allergic to tree nuts. This number does not reflect the numbers who battle wheat, soy, dairy, and other food allergies.

Several steps are necessary to avoid adverse reactions to these foods, and measures taken depend upon the severity of the allergy. What *do* you do when you or a family member has food allergies but you need or want to travel?

The first step is to determine which foods cause allergic reactions. Diagnosis by a physician, preferably an allergist, is the safest and most effective way to combat food allergies. Second,

know the severity of the reaction, which can range from discomfort, itching, or hives to anaphylactic shock. Knowing how the allergy is contracted — that is, by ingestion, inhalation, or surface contact — is essential. All of this information is necessary in determining the mode of travel, the foods and medications to take along for an “uneventful” trip.

Traveling by car is the safest mode for a food allergy sufferer, because there can be total control over the environment. If someone is allergic to certain foods, then “safe” foods can be packed and taken on the trip to avoid problems. All “unsafe” foods can be eliminated, reducing the chance of ingestion, inhalation, or contact. Since traveling by car is not always feasible, researching the allergy policies of other methods of transportation is essential so that the “travel plan of action” can be implemented.

The cruise industry has made great strides in providing for those with food allergies. Although the environment of the entire ship cannot be controlled, persons with less severe food allergies can be accommodated. Reviewing the cruise line’s policies is up to the traveler but is easily accomplished via the company’s website. Most of these websites provide extensive information regarding food allergies and special diets, points of contact for further correspondence, and cutoff dates for special dietary needs notification. Simply clicking on links to customer service, customer care, or typing ‘dietary needs’ into the search function will provide the information needed. Some websites also contain information under FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions).

Most airlines have food allergy policies. Combating severe food allergies transmitted by air is more

problematic because of the enclosed cabin of an airline. Individuals with food allergies can fly safely as long as they pre-plan and take necessary precautions. Reviewing the airline's food allergy policies is the first step and can be conducted by a website search. Many airlines provide peanut/nut free flights or peanut-free zones on planes. Some airlines have banned peanuts/nuts entirely.

Most airlines make arrangements for various allergen-free meals but require prior notification. For travelers with the severest allergies, it is best to bring food from home just to ensure freedom from allergy-causing ingredients.

Additional precautions include having an epinephrine pen available for "just in case" moments.

The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network sponsors a comprehensive website filled with information regarding food allergies, avoidance, causes, and extensive information regarding traveling with food allergies. They also list the peanut/nut allergy policies of several airlines, as well as those that do not have a policy. In addition, the site provides information for filing complaints against airlines that do not honor their food allergy policies. The website is available at <http://www.foodallergy.org/> Advocacy

Traveling is always a time of planning and preparedness, and planning meals and snacks is just another step. While individuals with food allergies have to plan "safer" foods and surroundings than others, thorough planning can assure healthy, happy travels.

For more information about healthy eating, contact your local extension office.

The Food Assistance Program can help people of all ages with low income buy nutritious foods for a better diet.

To find out more, call toll-free 1-888-369-4777.

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In each case, credit Toni Bryant, MS, Family Nutrition Program Assistant Coordinator, Department of Human Nutrition; Kansas State University; *Traveling with Food Allergies*; October 2007.

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