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By Mary Allen, Regional Coordinator AAIA Quebec and Gloria Shanks, Regional Coordinator AAIA Atlantic . Reproduced with permission.

As children head back to school, it is important to make sure that teachers and school administrators have sufficient information and clear instructions about medical requirements for the children in their care. Some advance preparation is essential. Teachers will have their hands full during the first week of school, so it is better to communicate any special needs or medical information well in advance. Make an appointment several weeks before school starts or even earlier if the medical situation is serious or involves special precautions. A letter from a physician may be required. It is also a good idea to send a picture of the child along with any medication, to reduce the risk that it is given to the wrong child.

When sending your allergic child to school, it is normal to feel anxious. Your child may be anxious as well. Remember, education and preparation are important. This is a process that involves your child, his peers, teachers, school administrators, lunch time monitors and bus drivers. Concise written instructions are essential. It is also crucial that medication be readily available and that a MedicAlert® bracelet be worn.

In the long run, the goal is to prepare the child to be safe in all situations where allergens are present, at school and elsewhere. Even if the child is allergic to peanut and attends a school which has a "no peanut" policy, do not neglect the education and preparation strategy. No school can totally guarantee that children will never bring in peanuts. The best safeguard is a child who has been trained to act as if the allergen might be present and who is prepared to speak up if a reaction occurs.

The child's ability to look after him/herself should be well developed by the time he/she is old enough to visit neighbours' homes without having a parent along.

- Schedule a physical checkup before school begins. Obtain a letter from the physician giving information about the child's asthma and allergies.
- Meet with school personnel before the school year begins. Bring medications and copies of the doctor's letter to this meeting.
- Have an emergency plan in place. Post it where all staff will see it.
- Set rules in place at the beginning of the school year and be sure everyone knows and respects them.
- Medication supplied to the school should be clearly indicated with photo, name and instructions. Check expiry dates often.
- Store epinephrine injectors and other medications at room temperature (not in a glove compartment of a car or in a refrigerator).
- Replace epinephrine injectors and other allergy medications left in a school without electricity like during the ice storm in Quebec and eastern Ontario.
- Freezing temperatures affect them adversely.
- Be sure that everyone knows where medications are kept and that they are accessible at all times.
- If a child is allergic to animals, there should be no mammals or birds in the classroom. Classrooms without carpets are preferable.

- Meet the physical education teacher to discuss how exercise will affect asthma and how this can be managed.
- Keep the school informed of all changes in your child's health, medications and diet.
- Be sure the school has a notification phone number for emergencies. Report any changes.
- Volunteer to help on field trips and other class activities.
- Medications should accompany the child on excursions away from the school.
- Keep EpiPens® in their protective tube. This tube has a protective coating and provides UV protections from sunlight.
- Do carry the epinephrine injectors in a pouch around the waist so that it will be accessible at all times.
- Emphasize good hygiene and frequent hand washing.
- For very young children with severe food allergies, consider allergy-free zones in the school so that the child is not exposed to his/her allergies.
- Do not become complacent. There is no 100% guarantee that a reaction will not occur, even if there are allergy-free zones in the school. Be vigilant!
- Teach children to be responsible (age appropriately) for their eating rules.
- Food allergic children should never share food or drinks. Snacks can be provided by the parent of the allergic child for special occasions.
- Where such a policy exists, express appreciation to other students and parents for not bringing or sending restricted foods.
- Always read labels when purchasing food. Ingredients do change, so you must read product labels each time you purchase a food, even if you have purchased it numerous times before. Almost all product containers carry a 1-800 number if you have any questions or concerns.
- Never allow a food allergic student to eat a food that has not been prepared or sent from home.
- Encourage provincial school policies. Education is a provincial responsibility, so an identical nation-wide policy is unlikely.

For specific medical advice for your individual needs, consult your health practitioner.

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