

## **Cross-Contamination: What is Peanut-Free?**

*A peanut is a member of the legume family (e.g., beans, peas). The following precautions also apply to products containing tree nuts (e.g., walnuts, hazelnuts) and any food-related allergen.*

More and more these days, in our schools, social groups and community clubs, we have administrators and organizers requesting that people bring "peanut-free" snacks. For some people, the term "peanut-free" is a source of aggravation and annoyance, because peanut butter is almost universally a favourite food among young children. The unfortunate reality is that peanuts can pose a life-threatening risk for people with severe peanut allergy.

Food allergies appear to be increasing. People are becoming more aware of the severity of anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction). Once aware of the serious consequences, most people are very willing to keep food related social and school activities safe. Many people want to help reduce peanut allergens in social situations, but are not sure how to go about it. The two questions most commonly asked are: "What does peanut-free mean?" and "What is cross-contamination?"

### **What does "peanut-free" mean?**

It means that food does not contain peanuts, peanut butter, peanut oil or any form or derivative of peanut at all! It must not contain peanut stearate or "traces of peanut". Even if the ingredient label says "May contain traces of nuts or peanut", treat this label as if it says "contains nuts or peanut". A food item may be labelled as having "mandelona" or "new nuts", which means it contains peanuts soaked in almond flavouring and cut to look like almonds. AVOID these products.

Buying a peanut-free food or snack from the store means buying packaged food with ingredient labelling. If it does not have ingredient labelling (i.e., bulk bin goods, in-store produced baked goods), do not buy it because there is no way of knowing if it contains a peanut product, or has been in contact with a peanut product.

When buying from the store, follow these guidelines:

- Do not buy from bulk bins. You don't know what is in the product, or what was in the bin previously. Scoops get moved from bin to bin. Avoid bulk bags of food that have no ingredient labelling.
- Don't purchase baked goods from bakeries or donut shops where the food has been sitting with other goods under the same glass display or where peanut products are produced. There are many, many ways that your purchase could have been cross-contaminated with peanut. The product may have been made on the same counter as peanut products, or with the same utensils, or the tongs used to pick up your purchase had previously been used to pick up a peanut product.
- The best "baked" snacks from the store are cookies, crackers and cereals that are well labelled and tightly packaged.

### **Home preparation (if homemade snacks are allowed in class):**

Make sure your ingredients contain no peanut products. The key is to READ THE INGREDIENTS of every item. You can't assume that they will be the same as when you last used it. Some potential sources of peanut are: cereals (especially granola mix), granola bars, cookie and cake mixes, rice cakes, crackers, ice cream, candies such as Ju-Jubes, M and Ms, and gumdrops. Many candy packages contain the warning "May contain peanuts/nuts" even if they themselves do not usually contain peanuts. (The child with the allergy should eat their own snack).

### **What is cross-contamination?**

Cross-contamination occurs when a safe food comes in contact with a food allergen such as peanut, nuts, seafood or milk. For those with severe food allergies, eating even the slightest trace of an allergic food can cause a potentially life threatening or fatal reaction. Although not everyone with food allergy is this sensitive, it's still important to be very careful and follow precautions.

Reactions can occur by several means:

- someone ate a peanut product
- they unwittingly ate a food that was not supposed to contain peanut but had been contaminated with peanut. This could occur through an unintended ingredient or from being in contact with peanut during preparation, storage or serving.
- They touched something with peanut traces and then put their hands in their mouth or touched their eyes. The most common instance of direct contact is when someone eats a peanut product and then touches a chair or table, leaving a smear or even a trace of peanut. The next person to use that table or chair could be severely peanut allergic, and that residue, if ingested, could be enough to cause a reaction.

Recent research shows that simply being near peanuts or peanut containing foods will not cause anaphylaxis in most cases. The asthmatic with peanut allergy will probably wheeze and/or have hives-- symptoms which could be defined as being part of an anaphylactic reaction, and most often treated with epinephrine. Follow your doctor's treatment instructions. If homemade goods are allowed in class, thoroughly clean all baking pans and utensils to remove any traces of peanuts or nuts if previously used in your last baking. When cutting up squares, start with a clean plate and clean the knife (not just wiped). When packaging them, keep them from touching peanut products until they are used.

Examples of how cross-contamination occurs:

- You place a wrapped "safe" cheese sandwich in the same container as a wrapped "food allergen" such as a peanut butter sandwich. Both sandwiches were wrapped separately but placed in the same storage container.
- You are making a peanut butter sandwich. You butter the bread with your knife; dip the knife into the peanut butter and spread it on the bread, then dip the knife into honey or jam and spread it on the bread. Cut the sandwich on the bread board and place the sandwich on a plate. You wipe the knife with the dishcloth. At this point there are traces of peanut on: The knife..in the butter..in the jam or honey..on the cutting board.. on the plate.. your hands...the washcloth and everything IT touches.
- You have been eating peanuts and kissed a child.
- You shared a sip of your pop with a child with peanut allergy after you had been eating a product containing peanut.
- You stored peanut butter cookies in a jar and then put in sugar cookies in after without thoroughly washing out the cookie jar. The sugar cookies would contain traces of peanut butter.
- Crafts or games involving peanuts, craft items stored in used peanut butter jars.

### **Cases:**

- 1) Another teenager at a summer camp in Ontario collapsed and died in her mother's arms outside a school gym after eating a grilled cheese sandwich made with butter that had also been used to make a peanut butter sandwich.
- 2) A child died in Montreal after eating a cheese sandwich that had been packed in the same bag as peanut butter sandwiches.

### **Conclusion**

Even with these precautions, the safest rule for children with a food allergy is that they should always bring their own snack from home for special food activities. However, the policy of whether to allow homemade goodies as snacks, and whether the child with a food allergy is allowed to eat the snacks provided, must be a matter of agreement among the caregivers, classmates' parents and the parents of the affected child(ren). The reason parents are asked to bring in "peanut-free" snacks is to reduce the very real risk of cross-contamination.

*For more information, contact the Allergy Asthma Information Association at <http://www.aaia.ca>. Also, look up Dr. Weisnagel's peanut allergy research article at <http://www.allerg.qc.ca/peanutallergy.htm>. Revised August 2000. This article courtesy of the Calgary Allergy Network web site at <http://www.calgaryallergy.ca>. May be reproduced for educational, non-profit purposes.*