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Doctors spread the word: peanut allergies are deadly

Half a nut can start fatal reaction; new treatments in works

By Tina Hesman

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ST. LOUIS - A simple kiss can kill. That was the lesson people with food allergies learned in November when a Canadian teenager died after kissing her boyfriend.

The girl, Christina Desforges, 15, was allergic to peanuts. Her boyfriend, reportedly unaware that Christina was allergic, had eaten a peanut butter sandwich earlier in the day.

New treatments for peanut allergies, including a vaccine, an allergy-blocking drug and herbal remedies, are in development, but food-allergic people may have to wait years to get relief.

"The only treatment right now is avoiding peanuts and preparing to treat a reaction," said Dr. Scott H. Sicherer, a researcher at the Jaffe Food Allergy Research Institute at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

An asthma drug, sold under the brand name Xolair, is in testing now to see if it will help people with peanut allergies, Sicherer said. The drug blocks the type of immune chemicals, called Immunoglobulin E antibodies, that provoke allergic reactions.

Relief for people with peanut allergies is several years away, he said.

But teens and young adults with peanut and other life-threatening allergies need to know now that even seemingly innocent activities and foods may pose a risk to them.

Inform teens of risks

The Canadian case garnered attention because it is unusual, said Dr. Suzanne S. Teuber of the University of California at Davis. It's not the first time Teuber has heard of such

problems.

Teuber and her colleagues were putting together a database of people with food allergies. Even though the researchers hadn't asked about kissing, 20 of their subjects volunteered information that they had had reactions, including hives, swollen lips and wheezing, after kissing someone who had consumed a food to which they were allergic.

They published the reports in the New England Journal of Medicine in June 2002.

“Since one-third of our subjects had reactions while dating, teenagers and young adults in particular need to be informed about this mode of exposure to allergens; patients of dating age who have severe food allergies may need extra encouragement to tell friends about it,” the researchers wrote.

Teenagers, in particular, may be embarrassed to tell others about their allergies, she said. Or others may not recognize how serious food allergies can be.

Laura Schulte knows that attitude all too well.

Schulte's son, Joe, 6, was allergic to peanuts, tree nuts, shellfish, milk, eggs and dairy products. Consuming any of those foods, or even coming into contact with them could send Joe into a severe and sometimes deadly allergic reaction known as anaphylactic shock. Joe has outgrown some of the allergies, but is still deathly allergic to peanuts, tree nuts and shellfish.

Protecting the young

Well-meaning adults often think small amounts of peanuts are fine for allergic children.

The lethal dose of peanut for an allergic person can be half a peanut or less, said Sicherer.

Unable to find a preschool that could keep Joe safe, Schulte started St. Stephens Early Childhood Development Program in St. Louis's Holly Hills neighborhood four years ago. The school is believed to be the only one in the country guaranteed allergen-free for children with food allergies and asthma.

The children at the school learn to wash their hands and faces before entering the school to avoid spreading allergens that could harm their classmates. The school allows no outside foods, serving only items that are safe for all the students to eat. Birthdays are celebrated with crowns and stickers instead of cakes.

Peanut allergy facts

Up to 8 percent of children younger than age 6 (about 2 million children) are intolerant to certain foods. But only 2 percent to 4 percent of children with food intolerances have

actual food allergies.

About 20 percent of young children with peanut allergies will outgrow the allergy by the time they reach school age. People who have not outgrown the allergy by then are likely to be allergic for life.

About 3 million Americans, or 1.1 percent of the population, have allergies to peanuts or tree nuts (walnuts, cashews, etc.).

Approximately 150 to 200 people in the United States die each year from anaphylaxis related to a food allergy. Peanuts are the most common cause of food allergy deaths.

Severe reactions send about 30,000 people to emergency rooms each year.

Teens and young adults with food allergies and asthma are most likely to have a severe or fatal allergic reaction.

Some 5.3 percent of nut-allergic people responding to a food allergy questionnaire spontaneously reported having reactions after kissing someone who had eaten nuts.

Milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish and shellfish account for about 90 percent of food allergies.

People with peanut allergies must be careful when eating at restaurants. Certain cuisines are particularly problematic. African, Chinese, Indonesian, Mexican, Thai and Vietnamese dishes often contain peanuts, or become contaminated with peanuts during preparation.