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Awareness Grows for Food Allergies

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Posted: Wednesday, May 16, 2012 12:00 am

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By Kirsten Ballard

Staff Writer

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Every parent struggles to get their child to eat the right things. But what happens when sometimes the right things are very wrong?

That's the challenge for parents whose children suffer from food allergies.

This week is Food Allergy Awareness Week. Food allergies affect as many as 15 million Americans. There is no cure for food allergies; living with them requires strict avoidance of the allergen. Even trace amounts can cause significant health problems from skin breakouts to life-threatening anaphylactic shock.

Food allergies have increased in recent years, according to the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network, or FAAN. Approximately one in 13 children now has a food allergy.

Nine-year-old Pinehurst resident Ava Wellener has had severe food allergies since she was 18 months old. Around the time she began eating solid foods, she was diagnosed with allergies to peanuts, tree nuts and eggs.

Before she started kindergarten, Ava went to her doctor and took a food challenge. In a safe environment, she ate the foods that induce anaphylactic shock.

Children often outgrow milk and egg allergies, and food challenges are one way

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to test this. After the first food -challenge, Ava no longer reacted to peanuts.

Having a school-age daughter with severe food allergies requires a lot of precaution from her father, Andy Wellener. Each school year, he trains Ava's teachers with the epinephrine auto-injector pen.

Phyllis Magnuson has been a school nurse for Moore County Schools for 32 years. After working with the Wellener family, she applied and was awarded an FAAN grant. With the grant, Magnuson will be going to California for a four-day nurse's conference on advocacy this June.

"School nursing evolves," says Magnuson. As local schools saw an influx in food allergies, there was "a steep learning curve" for staff.

"We had to learn how serious it was and how to prepare a safe environment," says Magnuson.

Working with Magnuson, the Wellener family created an emergency plan poster for Ava. These plans outline the symptoms of a reaction and how to treat them. Ava's laminated emergency plans are hung in classrooms, the cafeteria and the school's front office.

In kindergarten, Ava sat at the end of the lunch table to limit exposure to allergens. Her friends packed lunches that would be safe around her and joined her at the table end.

"There is no one-size-fits-all for food allergies," Wellener says. "This might not work for other kids, but it worked for us."

The Wellener family are members of North Carolina's Food Allergic Children Excelling Safely (NC FACES), a volunteer support group in the Raleigh area.

Wellener uses it for a sounding board and advice. The group ranges in age and allergy severity.

For people with more severe allergies, even physical contact or inhalation can cause a reaction. Schools struggle with avoidance of trigger foods during lunchtime.

Outside of the lunchroom, birthday parties and -sleepovers still presented problems for Ava. Egg -allergies ruled out birthday cake, brownies and even the breading on chicken nuggets. Her family turned to vegan recipes and recipes that are tailored to food allergies.

Her teacher keeps a -special snack box in the classroom with safe foods when there is celebration food she can't eat.

Fortunately, by second grade, Ava's food challenge revealed she had outgrown her allergy to eggs. Now a third-grader at Episcopal Day School, Ava is packed a lunch and separate placemat so her food never touches the table. She is careful about washing her hands and never shares food with her classmates.



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Ava takes on more responsibility for her allergy. Currently, her teachers have an epinephrine auto-injector pen. Soon Ava will be trained to use her own pen.



Ava all
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own advocate. She takes her allergies seriously and always asks about -aurants. She showed off her pink EpiPen princess pouch and talked about



"It's be
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fun because if kids bring in snacks I can't have, I go home and have dinner," she says. During past food allergy awareness weeks, Ava has hung school letting people know what they can do to make it easier for those

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Other
peanut

g the Food Allergy Awareness Week include the 10th -annual NC FACES 5K Run/Walk at the Durham Bulls Stadium on May 20. Wellener hopes that with awareness will come inclusiveness.

"You have to be aware these are kids; they want to be included and be normal. Not be 'food allergy kid' but a kid who happens to have food allergies," says Wellener.

Contact Kirsten Ballard at kjballar@email.unc.edu.

JUL

04

4th of July Parade Pinehurst and Farmers Market

9:30 am | Downtown Pinehurst, Pinehurst

JUL

04

Pinecrest Patriot 5K & 1 Mile Fun Run

7:30 am | Pinecrest High School, Southern Pines

JUL

05

Pinehurst High School Class of '64 50 year reunion

5:00 pm | The Fair Barn at the Race Track, Pinehurst

JUL

10

Family Fun Night at the Southern Pines Pub...

5:30 pm | The Southern Pines Public Library, Southern Pines

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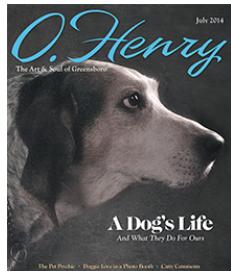
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