

Script – Print – Keeping kids safe from the dangers of peanut allergies

When you think about peanuts, it's easy to look back to your childhood when so many grew up eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Or when we devoured a sleeve of peanut butter cookies after school.

But there were also kids who couldn't partake because they had a peanut allergy. "Having a peanut allergy, or really any food allergies, can be difficult for school-aged children," says [Alissa Bartel](#), APRN, a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare. "Sometimes you can feel really left out because you have to have different snacks or different treats."

But recent studies now show a decline in peanut allergies among young children. Peanut allergy affects about 2% of children in the U.S. and is the third leading cause of severe allergic reactions behind milk and eggs.

"Peanut allergies used to be the most common allergy, food allergy in children, now is ranked about number three in food allergies in kids," says Bartel. "We've done a better job of exposing kids to this earlier and possibly preventing allergies later on in life."

Introducing common allergenic foods a couple of times a week like a couple of bites of scrambled eggs or a taste of peanut butter can help train an infant's immune system, says Bartel. "We do know that early exposure to the most common allergens actually is beneficial, and so we used to say wait until kids are older than one year," says Bartel. "But now we say you can start exposing kids as early as four to six months when they first start eating."

Symptoms

The most common symptom of an allergic reaction to peanuts is hives or blotchy skin. But drastic reactions to peanut allergies include wheezing, shortness of breath or in some cases loss of consciousness, or sudden death.

A year ago, a 22-year-old college graduate from Texas died just days after receiving his degree when he ate a late-night snack that contained peanuts. In 2024, another college student died after experiencing anaphylactic shock, a life-threatening allergic reaction. She became severely ill after unknowingly eating peanut sauce that had been added to a meal she frequently ordered at a restaurant.

"Peanut allergies happen when our body is exposed to the proteins in peanuts, when we ingest them or come into contact with them, and our body misidentifies those proteins in peanuts as something that's almost attacking us," says Bartel. "So, our immune system actually starts to attack those proteins."

Nearly 80% of people never outgrow a peanut allergy. That's why it's important to connect with a medical provider, particularly an allergist who can do proper testing of a specific allergy, confirm the allergy and identify any further allergies you may have. An allergist can perform a food challenge test in a controlled setting. Patients can have re-exposure to tolerate foods that they once had a negative reaction to.

The number one treatment to prevent complications when you have been diagnosed with a peanut allergy is to not consume peanut containing or contaminated ingredients. That makes reading labels at the store even more important. "And then, if you decide to go out to eat, just being an advocate, making sure you're telling the people who are making and serving your food that you have a food allergy," says Bartel. "They should be upfront and honest in letting you know if they can safely prepare your food."

But if you or someone you know experiences a reaction to any food – trouble breathing, wheezing, your throat feels tight – don't delay. Consider it an emergency and seek help right away. It could save your life.