

Peanut-free schools: What does it really mean, and are they necessary?



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Key words: Peanut allergy, food allergy, anaphylaxis, school, epinephrine

Approximately 4% to 8% of children in the United States have at least 1 food allergy, including 1% to 2% who are allergic to peanut.¹ These rates have increased during the past 2 decades for reasons not fully understood.² Current food allergy management entails strict avoidance of the food allergen along with immediate access to self-injectable epinephrine in case of accidental ingestion causing anaphylaxis.

Parents of children with food allergies must learn to communicate with caregivers, food handlers, and school personnel. They might be the only source of food allergy and anaphylaxis education that other adults receive. Caregivers of children with food allergy report lower quality of life, particularly because of stress from continuous avoidance measures and anxiety surrounding the potential for anaphylaxis.³ Sending a child with food allergy to school under the watchful eye of other adults, including those potentially unfamiliar with identification and management of anaphylaxis, can increase stress for many parents.

In 2016, approximately 50.4 million US children were enrolled in public schools, encompassing 13,491 school districts and 98,271 buildings.⁴ Conservative estimates place an average of 37 students with peanut allergy in each school district and 5 in each school building. Schools must now consider management of food allergy in the school setting as a priority. However, the knowledge and management strategies used by schools are highly variable. In an effort to raise awareness and provide evidence-based recommendations, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in consultation with the US Department of Education, developed voluntary guidelines for management of food allergies in schools that were made publicly available in 2014.⁵

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines are not a mandatory training program, and the extent of dissemination of these recommendations is unknown. This comprehensive document provides information directed toward administrators, nurses, teachers, and school personnel. The guidelines provide education regarding the recognition and management of anaphylaxis plus specific recommendations to mitigate the risk of

exposure within the school setting. However, one recommendation lacking from this document, as well as from any professional organization to date, is the adoption of allergen-free schools.

Despite this, many schools have implemented self-imposed peanut-free policies within their districts or buildings. The origins of this movement are unclear, as is the prevalence of such policies within US schools. These policies are an effort to protect students with peanut allergies and reduce concern from their parents surrounding accidental ingestion. Unfortunately, there is a lack of evidence surrounding the benefit or harm from such policies.

Implementing broad policies that affect all students can be challenging, particularly in determining the best methods to minimize risk while limiting inconvenience to those unaffected. In regard to peanut-free policies, this can be an emotional topic for parents of children with food allergy, as well as those without food allergy. A peanut-free policy might protect children from accidental peanut exposure. However, this does not protect students with other food allergies and risks alienating these families. In addition, parents of nonallergic children have used social media and online forums to express displeasure over limitations on their children imposed by food bans, including limiting their lunch choices or ability to bring food-based treats for classroom celebrations.

The study by Bartnikas et al⁶ in this issue of the *Journal* provides the first large data set (2,223 schools and 1,116,667 students over a 5-year period) exploring the effect of school peanut-free policies on clinical outcomes, namely epinephrine administration, for treatment of anaphylaxis. This study demonstrated that peanut-free policies are highly variable among school districts, particularly in regard to specific measures put in place by the schools. The authors had access to a large Massachusetts database that used mandatory standardized reporting measures after use of epinephrine within each school. This enabled them to determine rates of epinephrine use, as well as the suspected cause of reactions. Interestingly, they identified higher rates of epinephrine use in schools with peanut-free policies compared with schools without such policies. The only strategy that appeared to be associated with lower rates of epinephrine use across all ages was inclusion of a peanut-free table in the cafeteria. Middle/high schools with peanut-free classrooms also had lower epinephrine administration rates.

The limitations of this study include reliance on survey data from school nurses and a 55% response rate. It is possible that some of the reported causes of reactions were not accurately identified or due to peanut/tree nut exposure. In addition, the questionnaire identifies the location at which epinephrine was administered but not at which allergen exposure occurred. The strengths of this study include the large data set and access to nurses who use a mandatory standardized reporting system.

Why would schools with peanut-free policies have higher rates of epinephrine administration? Understanding this will require additional studies, but some possible explanations exist. Inspection of every snack, lunch, or bag brought into the school by every

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Disclosure of potential conflict of interest: D. R. Stukus has an unpaid volunteer position on the board of directors for the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America; has had consultant arrangements with Aimmune Therapeutics; is employed by Nationwide Children's Hospital and the Ohio State University College of Medicine; and has received payment for lectures from the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology.

Received for publication March 20, 2017; accepted for publication March 30, 2017.

Available online April 25, 2017.

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J Allergy Clin Immunol 2017;140:391-2.

0091-6749/\$36.00

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaci.2017.03.037>

student every day would be required for schools to become truly peanut free. Although letters to parents and reminders might help reduce the presence of peanut inside the school, some parents might inadvertently send these foods to school. It is also possible that less stringent avoidance strategies can be applied because of a false sense of security if a peanut-free policy is in place.

Ideally, data from prospective randomized studies will provide the best strategies to implement inside schools to mitigate the risk of reactions, but these will be challenging and are currently nonexistent. Prior studies have identified a need to address food allergy management within schools. Gupta et al⁷ identified that only half of students with food allergy attending Chicago public schools had a current food allergy management plan on file. Survey data of schools receiving free epinephrine autoinjectors revealed that 9.6% of schools that responded had at least 1 event prompting use of epinephrine during the 2013-2014 school year.⁸ Details regarding the exact cause were unavailable, but food allergens were listed as the cause in 62% of anaphylactic events.

Instead of focusing on allergen-free policies, perhaps efforts should focus on increasing awareness and education of school personnel and creation of mandatory standardized reporting mechanisms to better manage food allergies in the school setting.

As experts in food allergy and anaphylaxis, allergists are in a position to assist both families and schools in understanding the challenges surrounding food allergy management.⁹ Before each school year, a food allergy treatment plan should be updated and shared with the school. Parents should receive anticipatory guidance specific to their child's age and developmental level. They should be educated regarding both high- and low-risk situations to help provide a realistic understanding of the risks involved in various situations and focus efforts accordingly. Lastly, should it be necessary, allergists can help parents navigate the challenges of requesting and completing a 504 plan for their child.

As for schools, implementation of school-wide policies should be determined on an individual basis. The number of buildings,

physical layout, daily schedule, capacity of school personnel to recognize and treat anaphylaxis, and availability of full-time school nursing are some of the factors that need to be considered by school administrators when considering a peanut-free policy. Accommodations in one school might not be possible or necessary in another school.

Bartnikas et al⁶ have provided valuable information for a topic lacking sufficient data on which to base recommendations. Until we have a better understanding of the benefits and risks entailed, it would be prudent for parents, schools, and physicians to strive toward improving awareness and education of the management of all food allergies in the school setting and focus less on specific allergen-free policies that might not be beneficial.

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