

## During an Emergency: Now What?

### **Food Groups**

Most individuals who don't have allergies don't and can't understand a complicated ingredient label. Think of how often you read ingredient labels before being diagnosed with allergies or having a child with them. Likely not very often! If you're like me, probably never at all. If you tell someone you want potato chips, for example, they may not be able to find the type of potato chips you want . . . since even the oil can be a problem. And they won't know that French fries can contain milk products. To most people, a potato chip is a potato chip. The problem is that you'll likely get offers of "Can I bring over a dinner?" if going through a serious hitch in life. At a time when you want to remain well and able to function, replying "yes" may be farthest from your mind. However, can you think of any food groups that are completely safe for you? Would a fruit basket be safe? How about some vegetables? If there's an entire group of foods you're not allergic to, it's much easier for people to understand what they can give you when you're in need.

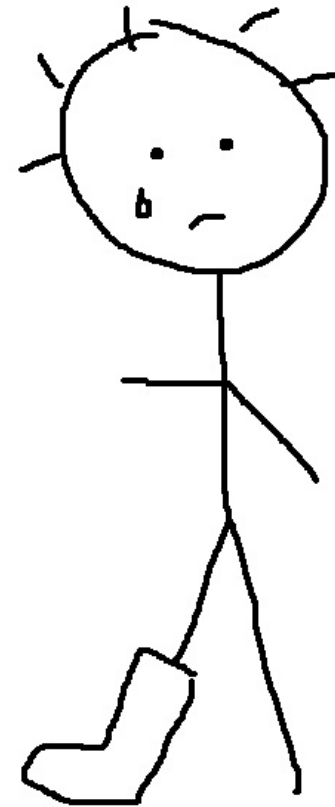
### **A Helpful Friend**

Look at your prepared list of phone numbers of reliable friends and/or relatives. Perhaps you might like to have someone volunteer to cook in your home using ingredients already there. Have him or her use ingredients that are in the home, and be sure to watch the entire process.

Think of a scenario that makes it easy to explain to people how common it is to accidentally contaminate food with one of your allergens. One that I use is this: "If you spray a pan . . . the food now has soy in it." People never think of how easy it is to contaminate food with allergens, but a similar quick scenario can be helpful in showing them why you're extra careful.

# Allergies and Emergencies

## Preparing for the Unexpected



# Welcome

Are you the sole caretaker of a child with food allergies? Do you personally only have one advocate who knows which foods are safe for you? Or, maybe you don't know anyone who understands any of your allergies. If you can identify with any of these scenarios, you're not alone. Because being knowledgeable about what foods are safe is such a monumental task, plenty of individuals with food allergies find that they have very few people who understand their allergies and are able to safely prepare food for them.

Nobody wants to think about emergencies. But whether we think about them or not, they do happen. Avoiding preparing for a future unexpected event may lead to more problems than if you were at least somewhat prepared for a situation where you can't physically go shopping or feed yourself or family member(s) with food allergies.

While it's sincerely intended that these tips will prove useful, they are not guaranteed to be useful or safe before or during an emergency. No one affiliated with FAST can be held responsible for what results from their use.

May your family always feel safe and secure, with advocates to help you along life's journey.



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When writing about the foods, include the brand and type, being as close to the original product title as possible.

## **Universal Knowledge**

If the following aren't known by everyone (of suitable age) in the family, and perhaps a few friends, then it's probably time to schedule a family meeting or two or three . . . !

- \* About cross-contamination and the importance of cleaning up. Is someone messy when s/he prepares foods? Teach him or her how to clean up so that the kitchen remains safe for the individual(s) with allergies. Explain how a minute amount of an allergen can cause a reaction. Remind everyone that once something is used (such as a mixing spoon or cutting knife), it goes in the dishwasher, not back where it came from. FAST member Detren reminds us that can openers should be cleaned after each use; she also has designated a safe cutting board.
- \* How to run basic kitchen appliances. This includes such things as the dishwasher, microwave, and blender.
- \* Where foods are stored and how to prepare them. If you have stocked up on foods and they're in the freezer, pantry, a little in a closet . . . people need to know where to find them. A list of where to find items may be helpful.
- \* Who can eat what. Some families with food allergies use coded stickers or write names with permanent marker on foods in order to indicate who can eat them.
- \* Ingredient knowledge. Just because someone has food allergies doesn't mean s/he can identify his or her own allergens on a label. For safety reasons, no one with food allergies should rely wholly on someone else to know everything about labeling.

## Before an Emergency: Things to Do Now

### **Non-Negotiables**

Non-negotiables are important things that can't be put off and are definitely necessary. For example, if you or your child with allergies have life-threatening allergic reactions, it's important to make sure other people know how to do epinephrine injections.

Prioritize your preparations so that the more important things are at the very top of your to-do list.

### **Organization Skills**

As a test of your organizational skills, you might ask other people to find various items in your home. Items to test would include a specific recipe, various types of food, and insurance information (and other important papers). If they're unable to find them easily, that means the items aren't organized in a clear enough way for others to understand. Often we come up with our own versions of "organization," which to other people may look like "a big mess." Come up with clear and standard methods of organization, such as alphabetizing files in a filing cabinet and writing names on safe foods.

### **Phone Numbers**

Keep an accurate, up-to-date phone number directory of friends and family members who are good helpers. If you have ever gone through an emergency-type situation before, you've probably learned the hard way that many people say they will help and then are too busy or unavailable; whereas others are more regularly available and follow through with offers.

### **Stores to Shop At**

Keep an up-to-date list of where foods are that you eat regularly. Because of the allergies, it's likely you shop at more than one store . . . one store may have a safe cereal, another may have a safe snack food. Write a list of where you find the foods that you generally eat, along with the physical address of each store.

### **Bulk Foods**

Join a program that allows you to buy foods in bulk at a discount, then find and stay stocked up on safe bulk foods with a long shelf-life. Options for bulk purchasing include mainstream buying clubs and food co-ops. In a food co-op, members typically have to purchase an entire case of a product; these products are often so-called "health" foods, which are occasionally less likely to contain allergens. You may also have a local health food store that would be willing to sell you cases of safe-for-you foods at a discount off the retail price.

If not everyone in the household can eat each food, mark on the foods who they are safe for in the family. If you have the allergies, these foods may prove helpful in the future for your family if you're ever unable to be home. Or, they may prove helpful in a situation where you are housebound for a length of time and unable to go shopping.

Don't just "buy" bulk, "think" bulk, too. When cooking, make extra servings when possible. For example, if there are only two people in your household, don't stick with cookbooks and recipes "just for two." Create more servings than you need, and freeze the leftovers. Double (or triple, or quadruple . . . ) recipes that are rather simple. Recipes for something with a dash here and a dash there or breads may not necessarily be easy to double, but a recipe for something like cookies may be. Freezers are great for keeping foods long-term.

### **Back-Up Person**

It's rare to find, but if you can find one . . . do. Perhaps a friend or relative wants to know as much as s/he can about all of your child's allergies. If someone shows a genuine interest and is reliable, see if s/he is open to being educated about them.

### **Cookbooks and Recipe Cards**

Mark safe recipes in cookbooks with a highlighter or other method of choice. Make adaptations directly in the book, such as crossing off "eggs" or "milk" and substituting what you use instead. Remember that an ambiguous word such as "flour" in a book may mean "rice flour" to you, but it won't to someone who doesn't understand your or your child's food allergies! Make sure you expound upon any ingredients that aren't obviously allergen-free for you.

Keep loose recipes organized in a manner that can be easily understood. Use a filing system with labels and organize recipes alphabetized by an easy word. For example, "Waldorf Cake" will be easier to find if filed under "C" than "W."

### **Foods File**

Something like "rice milk" to you likely means one specific product put out by one specific brand. To anyone else, it just means a carton of rice milk. After finishing convenience foods that you can eat, cut the labels off completely, and keep them in a file. Make sure the ingredient list is intact, as well as the front of the package (what others would be able to easily spot on shelves). On the label, using permanent marker, write down what store(s) the food can be found in. Be sure to cut out a new label/package when needed--companies often change packaging in order to draw attention to a product.

The ingredients are important to cut out in addition to the front of the packaging/label, because someone shopping for you can check that the ingredients are still the same. While most people (including plenty of people with allergies!) can't identify what ingredients really mean, they can read a label to make sure it matches the one you have saved.

If you don't like the idea of a thorough product packaging file, you might instead choose to keep all foods and baking ingredients in their original packaging. In a pinch, these

packages can be cut out and given to someone going shopping for you.

### **Freeze Foods**

Get in the habit of freezing leftovers, or even intentionally making foods in bulk to freeze. Put leftovers in the freezer rather than a refrigerator. While it's more of a problem to heat up frozen food when you need to have it in a hurry, the shelf life on a food that is frozen is much longer than when it's placed in the refrigerator.

### **Keep the Labels On**

Do you transfer grocery products into storage containers? For example, do you tend to transfer safe cereals or cookies into airtight containers? If so, cut out the ingredient label from any product and tape it on the storage container. Each time you renew your stock, verify that the ingredients have remained unchanged.

This simple step will help anyone with allergies be able to verify that a food product is safe for him or her. Do the same with various flours and cooking ingredients if they, too, are put in new containers.

### **Mail Order**

If possible, discover foods that you normally eat, for sale online. If you're physically unable to go shopping (such as being housebound with an injury), you may still be able to stock up on some of your basic foods from home if you are able to find them online. Check regularly to make sure they're still in stock, and to know how much shipping fees are. You may also try some trial orders to see how quickly (or slowly!) various suppliers can generally get the products to your home.