

## **Frequently Asked Questions for Parents About Food Allergies and the New RI Peanut Allergy Law**

Rhode Island Departments of Education and Health  
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### **Why are food allergies important?**

Food allergies can be fatal. They cause about 30,000 emergency room visits and claim about 150 lives each year in the US. Food allergies may also be becoming more common.

### **Why do schools need to address food allergies?**

Most kids who have allergic reactions to food have them at school. Schools need to take steps to protect these students while they are at school. Schools also need to be ready to deal with any emergency that may arise.

### **What is a food allergy, anyway?**

A food allergy is an unusual, bad reaction to a food. The body's immune system reacts to an otherwise harmless food as if it were harmful. The body releases chemicals, including histamines. These cause symptoms in different parts of the body. The most common food allergies are to peanuts, tree nuts, milk, soy, eggs, fish, crustacean shellfish, and wheat. Other foods can cause allergies too.

### **What are the symptoms of a food allergy?**

Symptoms can range from mild to severe and even life-threatening. Symptoms happen in different systems of the body:

- skin (itching, hives, rash, swelling of the lips, tongue and throat);
- breathing (runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, coughing, wheezing, difficulty breathing);
- digestion (cramps, vomiting, diarrhea); and
- blood (drop in blood pressure, lightheadedness, fainting, shock).

Symptoms may start right after a child has eaten or touched a certain food, or they can start up to two hours later. Serious reactions are life-threatening and are called anaphylaxis.

### **What is anaphylaxis?**

Anaphylaxis is a serious allergic reaction in more than one system of the body. Anaphylaxis is life-threatening. Difficulty breathing or a drop in blood pressure are signs that someone needs immediate medical attention and treatment.

### **Is there a cure for food allergies?**

No. Right now there is no cure. The most important thing is to prevent a reaction. That means keeping allergy-causing foods away from the person with the allergy. If a student does have a reaction, epinephrine (also called adrenaline) is the best medicine.

**What does the new state law do?**

The new state law basically does three things. (1) School districts, charter schools and private schools have to have a policy to protect students with peanut/tree nut allergies while they are at school. (2) Elementary, middle and junior high schools have to create plans outlining how the school will protect each student with a peanut/tree nut allergy that may be severe. These plans, called Individual Health Care Plans (IHCP) and Emergency Health Care Plans (EHCP), are created together by the school, the family of the allergic student, and the student's doctor. These plans will help prevent the child from having an allergic reaction at school. They will also help make sure the child gets fast and effective treatment if he or she does have a reaction. (3) The law says that all schools have to post signs letting people know if there are students in the school with peanut/tree nut allergies.

**Does the law ban peanuts from all schools?**

No, the law has each school come up with its own ways to protect children with allergies. There are no blanket rules for all schools because peanut/tree nut allergies vary from one child to another. Some children just cannot eat peanuts. Others cannot even touch them. In very rare cases, children cannot be anywhere around them because they can react to small amounts in the air. With the IHCPs and EHCPs, each school will put in place only those steps and rules that are needed by its students. If necessary, the school does have the right to ban peanuts and peanut products completely.

**What are Individual Health Care Plans and Emergency Health Care Plans?**

These are plans for taking care of a child with special health care needs, including food allergies, while they are at school or a school event. These include things to do to prevent a problem or emergency. They also include specific directions about what to do in a particular emergency at school or a school event. In the case of a peanut/tree nut allergy, an IHCP may include things like requiring nut-free tables in the cafeteria, creating nut-free classrooms, new rules about hand-washing after meals, new rules about snacks, or new rules about birthday celebrations. The IHCP and EHCP are created by the school nurse, the child's parents, the child's health care provider, and, if possible, the child.

**What do I need to do now?**

If your child has a peanut/tree nut allergy, let the school know as soon as you can. The nurse will meet with you to create an Individual Health Care Plan and an Emergency Health Care Plan. If your child does not have a peanut/tree nut allergy, wait to hear from the school. They will let you know what new steps and rules they are putting in place to protect allergic students. Please do everything you can to follow their instructions. If you are unclear what you need to do, ask the principal, your child's teacher or the school nurse.

**My child has a peanut/tree nut allergy, but the symptoms are mild. Do we need to create an IHCP and EHCP?**

No, you are not required to by the new law, if you do not want to. But you should be aware that food allergies may become more severe over time. Talk with your child's health care provider to figure out what is best.

**My child has a serious allergy to a food other than peanuts/tree nuts. Can we create an IHCP and an EHCP?**

Parents may request Individual Health Care Plans and Emergency Health Care Plans for any medical condition that affects the health and safety of their child. The new law does not specifically cover allergies to other foods, but they can be just as dangerous as peanut/tree nut allergies. Talk to the principal or school nurse, if you have any questions.

**My child attends high school and has a serious allergy to peanuts/tree nuts. Can we create an IHCP and an EHCP?**

Although the new law does not specifically cover high schools, beyond requiring signs, peanut/tree nut allergies are just as common among high school students as they are among younger students. Again, parents may request Individual Health Care Plans and Emergency Health Care Plans for any medical condition that affects the health and safety of their child. Talk to the principal or school nurse, if you have any questions.

**I think my child may have a food allergy but I'm not sure. What should I do?**

Talk to your child's health care provider right away. Find out if it is a food allergy or if it is something else, such as food intolerance. If it is an allergy, find out how serious it is, how to prevent it, and what to do if your child has a reaction. Then let the school know, as soon as you can. Food allergies can develop over time and children can also outgrow them, so keep an eye on any changes. In any case, make sure that the school has plans in place and medications on hand to treat any student who shows signs of a food allergy.

**My child has a food allergy. Can she carry an "epi-pen" with her at school?**

Yes, as long as it is appropriate and your child can handle that responsibility, she should carry it with her at all times. But, if that is not appropriate, then the epi-pen should be kept in a safe and easily-available place. In either case, the child's prescription should be filed with the school nurse teacher. The school must have policies and procedures for the self-carry and self-administration of prescription medications.

**What are tree nuts? And why are they part of our school's new rules about peanuts?**

Tree nuts are nuts – such as almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, and walnuts – that grow on trees. Peanuts actually grow in the ground. Many children who are allergic to peanuts are also allergic to tree nuts or can become allergic to them. Most experts recommend that children who are allergic to one type of nut avoid others.

**How do I know if a snack contains peanuts or tree nuts?**

Many foods you might not expect have peanuts or traces of them. And food labels can be confusing. Fortunately, a new federal law requires food manufacturers to list the major food allergens clearly in the list of ingredients. Look for the words, "Contains peanuts" or "Allergy information" or "Allergy statement" next to or after the list of ingredients. When in doubt, assume that a food has peanuts in it.

**Where can I get more information about food allergies?**

For more information on food allergies, see Food Allergy Resources at [www.thriveri.org/peanuts](http://www.thriveri.org/peanuts).