

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Allergies at School

By Stephen Somerville

It is hard to believe that summer is over. It was over much too quickly and this year we did not experience that seven to ten day heat wave that makes it feel like a summer.

A colleague at work has a young daughter who was going into junior kindergarten this month. The young father was worried about his daughter's recently discovered peanut allergy.

I told him my son was found to have the same issue at the age of three and a half and we have all learned to live with it for the past seven years, as will his daughter and his family.

This topic reminded me of a column I wrote on the back in Sept 2008, which I reprint below (edited to fit this space) because of the interesting context at that time.

?There was an article in last week's Toronto Star about a Woodbridge school that has reinstated lunch bag checks to make sure food is nut and egg free because of a number of pupils who have life-threatening allergies.

?The article talks about the fact that the six families who launched a human rights complaint last year argue that their children's severe allergies are a 'disability' that should obligate their school to screen lunches for peanuts, eggs and any other food trigger.

?The parents say there's still a 'toxic environment' at the school and their children are still subject to intimidation and harassment there. The story noted that 'last school year, nuts were placed on the stairs of a portable during school hours and another was egged. All six students with the allergies had classes in portables.'

This brief column is not about taking sides; rather it is to provide two personal perspectives on this issue.

Growing up, I couldn't even remember anyone in the school, let alone my class, that had allergies.

Oh sure, a couple of kids had asthma ? and I would occasionally see them using the inhalers.

We were allowed to bring whatever we wanted for lunch, good ?ole peanut butter and jam was the mainstay of my two brothers and my diet.

I would take apart my sandwich and, when the lunch monitor wasn't there, compete with my fellow students to see who could get their sandwich to stick to the ceiling for the longest time.

We would also trade our sandwiches for other sandwiches or better yet, for different hockey cards.

I even tried to trade one of my brothers for a prosciutto meat and cheese sandwich!

Fast forward to last May.

My wife notices that our three-and-a-half year old son's face is becoming flushed, his skin is breaking into hives and his eyes are very red. We weren't sure what was happening. Julie washes his face a couple of times and he seems fine.

She takes Ryan to the doctor the next day; my son is diagnosed with mild allergies to shellfish but has life-threatening allergies to peanuts and could go into anaphylactic shock if he comes into contact with them.

?What is anaphylaxis?

?According to a recent issue of Today's Parent, 'Anaphylaxis is an extreme allergic reaction ? the body's most vigorous defense against a substance it deems harmful. The immune system goes into overdrive, firing out a chemical cocktail that can produce anything from a relatively minor tingling and swelling of the tongue to vomiting, difficulty breathing, a drop in blood pressure, loss of consciousness and death.'

??When anaphylaxis hits, an emergency shot of epinephrine will buy time until medical help arrives, and it can be administered by anyone who's had a bit of prior instruction and access to the allergic person's auto-injector (EpiPen is a widely used name brand).?

?My son now wears a MedicAlert bracelet and we have a number of EpiPens that go where he goes.

?So, I am now totally engaged. Where I used to bring ? if I was not going out for lunch ? a peanut butter sandwich ninety days out of a hundred, the house is now empty of all peanut or peanut related things.

?Back to the debate at the Woodbridge school.

?The Today's Parent article framed the questions well: 'Who is responsible for keeping allergic children safe? Does it take a total school ban on any food with the potential to kill, even those labeled 'may contain' for the manufacturers' own protection? Or does the responsibility fall to allergic children and their families to find ways to cope with the ever-present danger?'

?In my book, the best way to deal with this is by educating the teachers and the children as to what these allergies are all about and

also pointing out the tragic consequences that can befall anyone having an anaphylactic reaction.?

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