

# Living with a Food Allergy

Kris Toryu

‘Mummy, can I have this chocolate?’

For most parents, this question is familiar and easy to answer. ‘Yes’ if it’s not too close to dinnertime, ‘No’ if it is. But for my family, this is a dangerous question because my oldest son has nut allergies. In particular, he has a severe peanut allergy. Even the slightest trace of peanut could kill him. Scary stuff! Snack time, or any time for that matter, is fraught with life-threatening dangers lurking in every package or meal my son eats.

I have no allergies and neither does anyone in my family, so when my son was a little over a year old, I gave him the slightest taste of my toast with peanut butter. Within minutes, he was breaking out in hives, red and itchy. A trip to the emergency room confirmed that he was allergic to peanuts. At that time, he wasn’t deadly allergic, but we still needed to avoid giving him peanuts. Over the next few years, it was easy enough to avoid peanuts. However, when he entered elementary school, school lunch included peanuts or other nuts several times a month. The school had been informed and it was arranged that on ‘nut days’, a separate dish would be prepared. However, a month after school started, my son’s teacher, trying to manage a class of 35 first graders forgot there were peanuts in that day’s lunch and he ate it. I got a call after lunch saying he was having an allergic reaction. I hurried to the school, gave him the anti-histamine medication we keep on hand and he soon returned to normal. Unfortunately, about a week later, my son accidentally ate a small piece of chocolate with peanuts at his cousin’s house. When they realized this, they rushed back to our house and once again I gave him the medication. However, he soon started complaining his throat was scratchy. We decided we better take him to the doctor. Good thing we did as he was going into anaphylactic shock and by the time he arrived at the hospital, his blood pressure was dangerously low. If we’d waited much longer to take him, he could have died. It seems that having two reactions so close together had made his allergy go from moderately bad to off-the-charts bad.

So now we must be extremely careful. We read all labels. Not just ingredients, but we have to read the fine print on any packages to determine if there are products made with peanuts in the same factory. As I said, even the slightest trace could kill him. If there is any doubt, he doesn’t get to eat it. It’s tough for my son sometimes. When he receives snacks at festivals or events, they must all be checked and he can’t eat many because either there’s not enough information about ingredients on the package or there is information that the snack could contain peanuts. We recently attended a party where there was cake for someone’s birthday. But no cake for my son, because we didn’t know where it was made or what was in the cake. We have to be careful when we go to restaurants. We have to take food for him when we fly to Canada.

Many people suggest that he will outgrow this. No, he won’t. The allergy is too severe to ever get better. So we have an epi-pen. An epi-pen is a single dose of adrenalin he can administer himself, should he consume peanuts and go into anaphylactic shock. The shot works by keeping his heart pumping, buying him time to get to the hospital and start treatment to reverse the effects.

It sounds scary, doesn’t it? It is scary. But generally, in our daily life, compared to wheat or soy allergies, his risk of exposure is limited. Imabari city banned peanuts in school lunches several years ago and so he can still eat school lunch. Japanese food generally doesn’t include peanuts, so we do occasionally go out for dinner at restaurants we know-the risk of peanuts in yakiniku or pasta is pretty low. And although many store-bought snacks are made in factories with peanuts, we have a good idea which brands are safe.

Compared to my home country of Canada, awareness of allergies is still rather low in Japan, but that is slowly changing. Unfortunately, allergies seem to be on the rise and so out of necessity, people are thinking more about allergies. This means they are more mindful when offering food, thinking to ask ‘Do you have any allergies?’ For this, I am grateful, because it makes our situation safer. And my son is thrilled when I can say ‘Yes, you can have this chocolate.’

