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When Snacks Attack: Understanding Food Allergies

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My house is under renovation, so my husband and I are eating at restaurants a lot more than usual. Most of the restaurants we've been to lately have signs addressed to guests with food allergies, letting them know about methods of preparation, ingredients, and how to request foods that won't require an ambulance ride. Between my husband and me, we were quickly able to rattle off the names of more than a dozen friends and family members with some type of food allergy, which prompted me to do a little research on the topic.

First, I talked to our friends who can't eat gluten. They have [celiac disease](#), which isn't an allergy but a disorder that may be passed along genetically. Sometimes it doesn't appear until late childhood or adulthood, but it marks the end to bread as we know it. Gluten is in the usual suspects like pasta and breads, but it also shows up in everything from beer to salad dressing. Celiacs will have an immune reaction (typically of the gastrointestinal variety) if they eat gluten. Fortunately, the [Charlotte Celiac Connection](#) built this great list of local [restaurants](#) that provide gluten-free options. I've found that [Trader Joe's](#) has some especially yummy and inexpensive gluten-free snacks.

Next, I talked to my brother and others who have the "typical" (yet dangerous) food allergies, like shellfish and peanuts. According to the [Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network \(FAAN\)](#), over 90% of allergic reactions to food are caused by eight perpetrators: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy. According to the [Food Allergy Initiative](#), food-allergic reactions account for 203,000 emergency room visits per year—sending someone to the hospital every three minutes. Food allergies develop when the body's immune system becomes confused and attacks normally harmless food proteins, even if there's only a tiny trace of the food present. An equal-opportunity menace, food allergies don't care about race, ethnicity, age, or your personal preference for certain foods.

FAAN (a not-for-profit organization of over 25,000 families, physicians, food manufacturers and others) successfully pushed Congress to pass the "[Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Management Act](#)" (FAAMA) to help schools manage students with food allergies. If you think you have trouble reading food labels, consider how vulnerable children are, especially in school lunchrooms where pudding cups and string cheese fluctuate values faster than foreign oil futures. A June 2011 [research study](#) found that more children now have food allergies than ever before, and they're experiencing more severe reactions. Charlotte has an active support group for parents of children with food allergies: [PAK \(Parents of Allergic Kids\)](#). The Charlotte PAK motto is, "Live Life... Bring Epi," referring to the self-injectible [epinephrine](#) device that many people with bee sting, animal dander, or food allergies carry with them at all times. Charlotte PAK has special events for kids and their families, and even has board-certified allergy and immunology physicians as medical advisers.

Like most things in health, reactions to food can be very individualized. You may be sensitive to, intolerant of, or allergic to foods. According to this [Mayo Clinic](#) article, there are at least six reasons you may find a certain food intolerable without having a true allergic attack. Only a doctor can tell you whether you have a food intolerance or an allergy. Sorry, kids – there's no Facebook Quiz to prove you're allergic to Brussels sprouts or spinach. If you or

someone you know has a diagnosed food allergy, the National Institutes of Health just released a new [booklet](#) of tips for patients, families and caregivers.

Throughout my research I found that education is the best weapon against food allergies. As one food-allergic friend put it, "If your throat may swell shut because you don't ask the right question to a server in a restaurant, you learn to ask questions!" Some foods are easier to avoid (shellfish, peanuts), while others show up in everything on a fast food menu (eggs, wheat, milk), making some food-allergy sufferers into reluctant home chefs as their only way to be 100% sure of the ingredient list. If you don't have food allergies, be grateful but remember that they can develop at any age! *If you know someone with food allergies (or you have an allergy), please share your tips on living with food allergies in Charlotte! Who's got the best gluten-free pizza or peanut-free kids meals?*

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