

One in 12 U.S. Children May Have Food Allergies: Report

Peanuts, milk and shellfish most common allergens, study found By Jenifer Goodwin HealthDay Reporter

MONDAY, June 20 (HealthDay News) -- Nearly 6 million U.S. children -- or about one in 12 kids -- are allergic to at least one food, with peanuts, milk and shellfish topping the list of the most common allergens, a new study finds.

Researchers conducted a nationally representative survey of the parents of more than 40,000 children. About 8 percent reported having a child who had a food allergy. Of those, about 30 percent said their child was allergic to multiple foods.

Among kids with food allergies, 25 percent were allergic to peanuts, 21 percent were allergic to milk and 17 percent had an allergy to shellfish. Those were followed by tree nuts (13 percent), eggs (nearly 10 percent), finned fish (6 percent), strawberries (5 percent), wheat (5 percent), and soy (just under 5 percent).

While the study was a snapshot of the prevalence of food allergies in America and did not track change over time, researchers said anecdotal evidence -- including reports from schools and the numbers of patients coming in to allergists' offices -- suggests that the rate is rising.

"Eight percent is a pretty significant amount of kids," said lead study author Dr. Ruchi Gupta, an assistant professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University and a pediatrician at Children's Memorial Hospital, both in Chicago. "We are seeing a lot more cases. We are seeing a lot more in schools than we used to see. It does seem that food allergy is on the rise."

The study is published in the July issue of *Pediatrics*. Allergic reactions to foods can range from mild to severe. In the survey, about 61 percent of food allergic children had a mild to moderate reaction, including swelling of the lips and face, hives, itching, flushing or an eczema flare.

The remaining 39 percent had a severe or even potentially life-threatening reaction known as anaphylaxis -- wheezing and trouble breathing, vomiting, swelling, persistent coughing that indicates airway swelling and a dangerous drop in blood pressure.

The foods most commonly associated with a severe reaction included tree nuts and peanuts, shellfish, soy and finned fish.

"Especially for kids with multiple food allergies, it complicates their lives and makes it really tough on these kids to avoid multiple foods to stay healthy and stay alive," Gupta said.

Parents of children with food allergies should always carry antihistamine and an epinephrine shot (i.e., an EpiPen) with them, Gupta said. Even with those close at hand, witnessing a child having a serious food reaction can be terrifying for parents, who don't know how bad it's going to get and need to decide within moments whether to administer the shot and call 911.

Often, reactions happen when parents least expect them -- while they're at a family gathering or some other social event, and the child accidentally ingests something. Dr. Susan Schuval, a pediatric allergist at Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park, N.Y., agreed that food allergies seem to be getting more common.

"We are seeing tons and tons of food allergies. There also seems to be an increase from what we've seen in the past," Schuval said.

Right now, the only treatment available to most food allergic kids is avoidance. For parents and children, that means paying close attention to labels, taking precautions when eating out, bringing along their own food when they travel or go to social events such as birthday parties. It also means educating teachers, caregivers and other parents who may have their kids over to play about using an epinephrine shot and the seriousness of the allergy.

"They need to maintain their full alertness out of the home, in the schools and in restaurants," Schuval said. For some children, food allergies get better over time. Previous research has found many kids outgrow allergies to milk, egg, soy and wheat. Fewer outgrow peanut, tree nut, fish and shellfish allergies.

A wheat allergy is different from celiac disease, in which wheat cannot be digested properly and, over time, damages the lining of the intestines.

More information - The [Food Allergy Initiative](#) has more on food allergies.