

EVERYONE'S

The exaggerated threat of food

Of little concern to most parents or educators only a generation ago, food allergies are now seen as a childhood epidemic. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently began recommending that peanuts be withheld until a child turns three; hundreds of food-allergy nonprofits and local parents groups have formed; and six states have passed laws requiring food-allergy safety measures in their schools, with similar legislation currently being considered in Congress. Children are even being recruited to help battle this supposed threat, as in this Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) brochure, which enjoins young students to “Be a PAL” and protect the lives of their classmates. But the rash of fatal food allergies is mostly myth, a cultural hysteria cooked up with a few key ingredients: fearful parents in an age of increased anxiety, sensationalist news coverage, and a coterie of well-placed advocates whose dubious science has fed the frenzy.

One of the first and most influential of the food-allergy nonprofits, FAAN has successfully passed off as fact its message that food allergies have become more prevalent and dire. Since 2005, more than 400 news stories have used FAAN’s estimates that allergic reactions to food send 30,000 Americans to emergency rooms each year and that 150 to 200 ultimately die. The group derived these figures from a 1999 study of a rural Minnesota community, in which 133 people over a five-year period were determined to have suffered anaphylaxis—an allergic reaction that can mean everything from going into shock to developing an itchy mouth. Yet only nine people in the study ever required hospitalization for anaphylaxis from any cause. As for the death estimate, just one person died of anaphylactic shock, prompted not by food allergies but by exercise. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in its most up-to-date figures, recorded only 12 deaths from food allergies in all of 2004. When asked about these statistical discrepancies, FAAN founder and CEO Anne Muñoz-Furlong said focusing on any number misses the point: “One child dying from food allergies is too many.”

In 2005, every major American media outlet covered the story of a teenager who died after kissing a boy who earlier in the day had eaten a peanut-butter sandwich. This “kiss of death” confirmed for countless nervous parents their worst fears: food-allergic children were in constant danger—they could “even die!” as FAAN warns here—from any sort of secondhand exposure to certain foods. (In a press release soon after the girl’s death, FAAN instructed food-allergic teens to tell “that special someone that you can die.... Don’t wait for the first kiss.”) But there is simply no evidence that a food allergen can do serious harm if not ingested. Nicholas Pawlowski, an allergist at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, says he occasionally has to spread peanut butter on a patient’s arm to demonstrate to parents that their child will not die from casual contact with a nut. In the case of the peanut-butter kiss, a coroner later ruled, to no fanfare, that the girl had smoked pot soon before the embrace and actually died from an asthma attack.

No one knows exactly why, but more and more kids are becoming allergic to certain foods. Especially peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, soy, wheat, fish, and shellfish.

Sometimes, if they eat even a tiny amount of the food they’re allergic to, they can become very ill ... even die!

That’s why kids who have food allergies need all of us to help keep them safe. You too can help, and if you do a good job, you could become a PAL™ Hero and receive a special certificate.

Here are some of the ways you can Be a PAL: Protect A Life™

Be a PAL™
A PAL™ Hero is someone whose allergic reaction, or even save a life. The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) recognizes Heroes with special recognition and might be just what you need!
Just looking out for our friends however, makes us all heroes. So don’t forget how to Be a PAL™ ... and P

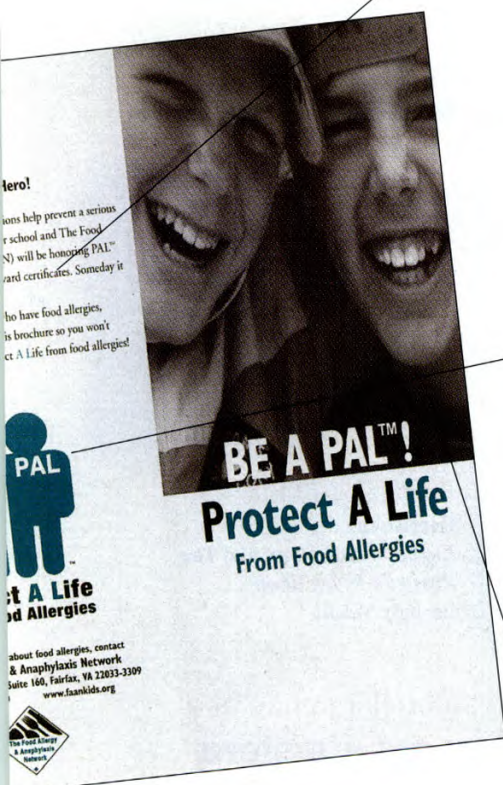


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GONE NUTS

allergies, by Meredith Broussard

In addition to offering certificates to “PAL Heroes,” FAAN presents individuals and businesses with a service award named after Muñoz-Furlong’s daughter, a former food-allergic child who, like most people, grew out of her allergies. Anne Muñoz-Furlong says she founded FAAN when her community didn’t seem to believe the threat to her child was real. Her organization and others have certainly helped to change the perception of food allergies. (A recent *Newsweek* cover showing a pigtailed girl in a gas mask with a carton of milk in one hand and a peanut-butter sandwich in the other is typical of much recent coverage.) But all we know for certain now is that more parents *think* their children suffer from food allergies. Indeed, even the best allergy tests produce high rates of false positives, and most studies of childhood prevalence interview no one under the age of eighteen. Ken Kochanek, a CDC statistician, says there are far too few recorded incidents of anaphylactic shock triggered by food allergies to draw any sound epidemiological conclusions: “We can’t find any hard data that supports the severity.”



These hugging forms evoke a better world in which we all look out for our food-allergic friends. Such chumminess already exists within the world of food-allergy advocacy. The FAAN children’s website was built using a donation from Dey, the distributor of the EpiPen adrenaline injector; Dey and Verus Pharmaceuticals, the maker of EpiPen’s chief competitor, sponsor FAAN’s major annual fundraising event. (As part of its safety guidelines, FAAN suggests carrying an adrenaline injector at all times and regularly renewing the prescription.) Just about all the leading food allergists also have ties to FAAN or the Food Allergy Initiative (FAI), an organization prone to even more extreme rhetoric. This intimacy helps explain why suspect statistical findings get published. For instance, the coauthors of an oft-cited study on the dangers facing food-allergic children at restaurants were Anne Muñoz-Furlong’s husband, who serves as a top FAAN executive, and a FAAN medical-board member whose research is funded in part by FAI. The latter is also an editor at the leading allergy journal where the study appeared; the journal’s editor-in-chief is head of FAI’s medical board.

There is no question that food allergies are real. Yet instead of creating the healthy, happy children shown here, exaggerating the threat may actually do as much harm as the allergies themselves. The peril is now perceived as so great that psychosomatic reactions to foods and their odors are not uncommon. Recent surveys have also shown that children thought to have food allergies feel more overwhelmed by anxiety, more limited in what they believe they can safely accomplish, than even children with diabetes and rheumatological disease. One study documented how food-allergic youths become terror-stricken when inside places like supermarkets and restaurants, since they know that allergens are nearby. Such psychological distress is exacerbated by parents, who report keeping their children away from birthday parties and sending them to school in “No Nuts” T-shirts. Having been fed a steady diet of fear for more than two decades, we have become, it appears, what we eat. ■

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