

healthy living

Allergic REACTION

Scott Bean, Resident and Partner at Link Real Estate



Concerned about her children's severe food allergies, a mother learns to help others overcome similar challenges.

For a woman whose greatest fear about having children was having to cook meals for them, Susan Freel ended up with a lot on her plate.

Newly married to a husband with children from a previous marriage, the first dinner she prepared for the family was such a flop that it became family lore. She can laugh now about seeing her then-signature dish, a meatloaf, being spat out in the sink by her stepson.

Soon after her own daughter was born, though, food became no laughing matter. At six months old, her daughter broke out into hives after sampling some soft-serve ice cream. At 15 months, a taste of hummus ended with her being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. Born with severe food allergies, every bite, every meal, every playdate could literally become a life or death matter.

It's scary enough having one child with severe food allergies, but then Susan gave birth to a son who was allergic to even more food groups than her daughter. Perhaps more frustrating and frightening are all the myths and misunderstandings surrounding food allergies.

"Some people label your child a 'fussy eater,'" says Susan. She adds that it's also hard for the uninitiated to grasp the scope of the problem, which extends far beyond simply avoiding peanuts and peanut butter. As little as five particles per million can cause anaphylaxis, a life-threatening reaction. Moreover, food does not even need to be ingested to become a health concern; sometimes all it takes is for a food to be airborne or come in contact with skin to cause a reaction.

Baffling professionals and families, alike.

Though there are many theories, medical science remains puzzled as to why food allergies have become so commonplace. An estimated 220 million people worldwide are diagnosed with them. "It's the million-dollar question," adds Susan. One thing this Nayatt mother was certain about was that she had to learn everything she could about food allergies, and to adjust her family members' lives accordingly.



"I didn't want my children to be defined by their diagnoses," explained Susan. "I also didn't want them to be embarrassed about keeping themselves safe. Together, we needed to strategize ways to live our lives the way we wanted to."

Today, her children have aged out of Nayatt School. Her daughter has grown out of her milk allergies. And Susan has gone on to become a Certified Food Allergy Coach, so she can share her knowledge and experience with others.

Though not medical professionals, Allercoaches, as they are known, provide non-judgmental help and support to families facing personal allergy challenges. In addition to guiding them along this sometimes-harrowing journey, they enable parents and children to live more confidently and comfortably with their condition.

Cooking up solutions to difficult situations

Working in tandem with allergists, other physicians and school nurses who most often do not have the time or specialized training, Allercoaches such as Susan, are valuable resources for families facing this delicate balancing act. "Living with food allergies requires being risk-free while transitioning to a safe and healthy environment," she explains.

Many people newly diagnosed with multiple allergies are merely given a piece of paper with a list of foods to avoid or face consequences of severe illness or death. An Allercoach helps people process this information and provides life skills for the real world. In addition to insights and practical advice about how to handle day-to-day work and school situations, Susan provides menu development, shopping assistance, kitchen organization tips to prevent cross-contact and more.

Especially for someone who once joked that she would never bake or cook, Susan Freel has gained a serious passion about helping others in the kitchen, as well as in life. If she might help you or someone you know, contact her at SusanFreelCoaching.com, 401 339-2775 or safreel@cox.net.