

Preschool (3–5 years)

The Food Allergy Stages handouts were designed to help families manage food allergies at different developmental stages.

- Use the *Food Allergy Basics for All Ages* handout to learn about important information all parents should know when they have a child with food allergies.
- Always speak with your child's allergist if you have questions or before making changes to your child's food allergy management plan.



During the preschool years, children work on developing a sense of control and independence. You can start to involve them in food allergy management in simple ways. When you are consistent with daily routines, children will learn what to expect.



Teaching Children about Food Allergy

- Preschoolers can understand simple rules and routines (e.g., washing hands before and after eating, no sharing food). However, they cannot be expected to follow rules on their own.
- When teaching your child about food allergies, speak with them in the same way that you talk about other safety issues, like looking both ways before crossing the street. Use a calm tone and focus on safety routines.
- Use simple explanations such as “You are allergic to eggs. Eggs can make you sick.” Or, “This food is safe for you. It has no eggs.”
- Teach your child the names of their food allergens. You can also teach them what the foods look like using photos, pictures, or during trips to the grocery store.



Allergen Exposure

- Use a song to teach how long to wash hands and make it fun (e.g., sing “Happy Birthday” twice).
- Teach your child not to share food, cups, or other tableware. “We can’t share food, because we don’t know if other people’s food is safe for you.”

Label Reading

- Explain routines out loud. “Let me read the label to see if this cookie has nuts.” Or, “The label says there is no milk in this bread, so it is safe for you.”
- Consider using sight word cards with allergen names and pictures to help your child learn the spelling of their allergens.

Recognizing and Treating an Allergic Reaction

- Be aware that sudden changes in behavior can be signs of an allergic reaction. These can include crankiness, crying that can’t be soothed, tiredness or sleepiness beyond what is expected or routine, lack of interest in playing, or clinginess.
- Preschoolers may use words like “a funny feeling in my mouth,” that food tastes “spicy,” or that their mouth feels “hot” or like there is something “stuck” in it.
- Teach your child what to do in emergencies. “If you feel sick or think you ate peanuts, tell a grown-up. We have medicine that can help you feel better.”
- Build comfort with the epinephrine auto-injector through supervised medical play with a training device (e.g., helping a stuffed animal feel better). You can act out how you would know the stuffed animal was having a reaction and how to tell an adult. Make sure your child understands not to play with their actual auto-injector.



Managing Food Allergies at Home

- Set rules such as only eating food served by a caregiver. Let your child know they should always check with you before eating a food if they are not sure if it is safe.
- Store allergens out of reach of curious hands.
- Make sure that older siblings understand important rules, such as not sharing food and washing hands before and after they eat.
- Talk about routines you follow before you leave the house. “Let’s use the bathroom, grab your coat, and make sure we have your allergy medicine.”

Food Allergy Stages: **Preschool (3–5 years)**

Eating Out at Restaurants

- Include your child in communicating at restaurants. You can practice ahead of time through play. “I have food allergies.”

Managing Food Allergies at Childcare and School

- Provide a supply of ready-to-eat snacks for your child in case extra food is needed.
- Find out how staff monitor meals. Make sure your child cannot grab other children’s food.
- Be aware of allergens in some art projects, sensory tables, Play-Doh, and paint.
- Send in a children’s book about food allergies for the teacher to read at story time.
- Make sure your child knows the trusted adults who can give them food at school.



Supporting Your Child’s Self-Esteem

- Preschoolers may start to notice differences from other children and family members or feel frustrated when they cannot eat something. This is normal.
- If your child is upset, listen first and help them label their feelings. “It seems like you are mad you can’t eat the pizza. Let’s find a food you enjoy that is safe for you.”
- Read children’s books about food allergy to show that other kids have food allergies too.
- Praise your child for following routines. “Great job checking if the cake is safe for you!” This will both encourage them to continue following these routines and help them feel more confident that they can manage their allergies.

Navigating Social Activities

- Keep a supply of safe treats to have available for birthday parties and celebrations.
- Provide close supervision on playgrounds or other settings where others may offer food.
- Carry wipes to clean surfaces and hand wipes if soap and water will not be available.
- Teach your child not to share food. “No thank you, I have allergies.”
- Prepare your child ahead of time that they may not be able to eat the food that is served at a party. Give them two to three choices of a safe treat to bring along.
- Consider having your child wear a medical identification bracelet. Prompt your child to show it to other children and adults. This builds the habit of teaching others about their food allergies. There are colorful plastic options that are well-liked by younger children.

Managing Anxiety and Feeling Confident

- Your child will pick up on your cues about coping with food allergy. When your words and behaviors show you are confident, this will help your child feel more confident too.
- If your child seems worried about food allergies (e.g., refusing safe foods, only eating when you are present), talk with your child’s allergist or primary care provider. Mental health professionals can help families cope with anxiety related to a child’s medical condition.

Preparing Children for Medical Visits

- Preschoolers can be told about a medical visit the same day. They may benefit from medical play in the days prior to the visit (e.g., examining dolls with a toy medical kit, or giving a stuffed animal a skin test).
- Use distraction and soothing strategies to help with medical procedures such as skin tests, blood tests, and food challenges. Examples include watching a favorite video, reading a book, blowing bubbles or a pinwheel, or hugging a blanket or stuffed toy.
- If your child is nervous, plan for a small reward immediately after the visit.

See the Food Allergy Stages *Early Grade School* handout for questions about managing food allergies as your child gets older.