

Allergy alert

As we finally get to dine with those outside our household, it's a timely reminder that looking after youngsters who have food allergies can be fraught with danger, as **Jo Macfarlane** discovers. But why are allergies on the rise so dramatically?



After many months of not seeing her one-year-old granddaughter Aimée, Darlene Wood was overjoyed to have the family back in Merseyside, a 6,000-mile journey from their home on the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean.

They ate in a Chinese restaurant to celebrate – but the consequences were nearly fatal. Aimée, who had been given a spare rib to gnaw on, began swelling dramatically. ‘It was the most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen,’ says Darlene. ‘Her face began to morph – it looked like it was bubbling.’

Aimée, then aged one, was rushed to Alder Hey Children’s Hospital. Her internal organs had swollen in size, her face unrecognisable.

The rib had been cooked in peanut oil and just raising it briefly to Aimée’s lips had caused a catastrophic allergic reaction that nearly killed her.

Aimée, now 18, has a range of life-threatening food allergies. Nuts are the deadliest, but she must also avoid kiwis, figs, soya, poppy seeds and legumes.

For those of us brought up in an age where food allergies were barely heard of, it’s easy to be sceptical about what the charity Allergy UK describes as a very modern epidemic. ‘I was very

ignorant of allergies before Aimée came along,’ admits Darlene, 68, from Southport. ‘I assumed that, if they didn’t actually eat something they were allergic to, they’d be fine.’

Food allergies are a serious problem in most Western nations. And there is no question among specialists that the numbers are rising, particularly in children. One in 50 children has a peanut allergy, with prevalence doubling in the past ten years. Between 2% and 3% are allergic to cow’s milk and one in 20 infants develops an egg allergy.

Not all are dangerous. Symptoms of a reaction can vary from an itching sensation inside the mouth, ears and throat to rashes and facial swelling. But in the worst-case scenario, it can lead to anaphylaxis, which restricts breathing and

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causes blood pressure to plummet. A recent study by Imperial College London found hospital admissions for food-related anaphylaxis increased by 5.7% every year between 1998 and 2018. Overall, they have risen threefold in that time. In a sign of how recent this trend is, the data has only been recorded since 1992.

Deaths, however, are rare – around ten every year in the UK – and reactions can be mitigated by adrenalin auto-injectors, such as EpiPens or Jext devices, which are often carried by those with severe allergies. But they aren’t always enough. Natasha Ednan-Laperouse was 15 when she died ➔



NO TO NUTS
Darlene Wood, right, with her daughter and Aimée, who, at 18, still lives with a range of food allergies

CASE STUDY

Nuts are one of the most common allergies – and you don’t have to be eating them yourself to be affected

Maureen Coates, 68, has developed a keen sense of danger to protect her two granddaughters. The retired teacher from Barcombe, East Sussex, described the moment she took Felicia, nine, and Mireya, seven, to their regular ballet class and realised that someone in the waiting room had brought peanuts.

The girls have food allergies that could cause life-threatening reactions: Felicia to peanuts and cashews, and Mireya to dairy and eggs. They both carry steroid inhalers and EpiPens, and all food must be strictly policed after Mireya was



RED ALERT
Maureen Coates with her granddaughters Felicia and Mireya, both of whom have serious allergies

regularly hospitalised as a baby. ‘As soon as I walked into that waiting room I thought, “I can smell peanut butter”,’ says Maureen. ‘I whisked Felicia into the fresh air and made her breathe deeply, terrified I’d forgotten her EpiPen. People just don’t understand the potency of peanuts and cashews, even in the air.’

✦ on a flight to Nice after eating a baguette from Pret a Manger that was not labelled as containing sesame seeds. She carried two EpiPens, but the reaction was too severe. Her parents, Tanya and Nadim, set up the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation (narf.org.uk) in her memory, which focuses on education and research.

Tanya says: 'We've received so many emails from parents of children with allergies. They say it has caused their own parents, who may not have encountered this before, to accept that they are real and serious. My mother, who loved Natasha more than life itself, would put out breadsticks containing sesame seeds when she was a toddler. My mother-in-law once used a spoon to taste soup she was heating for Natasha while drinking a cup of tea. By putting the spoon back in the pan, she was transferring tiny traces of milk protein, but it could

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have caused a serious reaction. It sounds like a huge over-reaction, but you can't be too careful.'

Sarah Thomson, 68, a retired university lecturer from Shrewsbury, Shropshire, admits having 'no awareness' of food allergies until her grandson, Felix, came along. Now ten, he is allergic to eggs, dairy, nuts, sesame, horses, cats and dogs, and has



WELL AWARE
Sarah Thomson and Felix. She says she has learned to take her grandson's allergies more seriously

asthma and eczema. 'I'm the eldest of five children, and we all ate like trenchermen, not a food allergy to be found between us,' says Sarah. 'So, when Felix came along, I initially took his allergies with a pinch of salt.' But she says she has 'learned so much' from Felix's parents – her son Matthew and wife Jill. 'I always fear we'll give him the wrong thing. Friends of ours had to take a child to hospital.'

The jury is out on what causes these reactions, although it is thought to be a combination of genetics, environmental factors and modern Western lifestyles. There are lower rates in developing countries, although migrants often acquire them in their adopted nations, and more in cities. This suggests pollution and diet may be key.

Another theory is that children are today exposed to fewer infections, particularly parasitic infections, which are fought by the same mechanisms that tackle allergies, according to paediatric allergy specialist Dr Alexandra Santos, at King's College London. Vitamin D deficiency, increasingly common as we spend more time indoors, may also affect a healthy immune system response.

Even the way babies come into the world could be having an effect. Caesarean sections – which account for one in five UK births today, up from 5% in the 1970s – are more sterile. Research suggests the guts of babies born vaginally benefit from being exposed to their mother's bacteria and are less likely to suffer food allergies. 'Allergy is a complex jigsaw puzzle,' says Holly Shaw, clinical nurse advisor to Allergy UK. 'It may be that today's lifestyle makes us more susceptible – and the consequences must be taken seriously.'

