

10 TIPS TO HELP RELATIVES "GET" FOOD ALLERGIES

Ideas from the experts to improve communications, especially for a big family gathering.

1. Know your own needs

Food allergy requirements can differ, so know what you need before you communicate with a relative planning a get-together. Ask yourself: Is it OK if they use the allergen in the kitchen? Should the host save all the packages for you to check ingredients? Are you OK with a dish containing milk or egg being placed next to the allergen-safe dish on the table?

2. DIY Food

In the early days of diagnosis, go more for the experience and rely less on the hosts for their food. With young children, you may prefer to bring their own food, and ask that allergens be out of reach.

3. Advance plan

With more experienced family, speak to the hosts about menu planning, cross-contact issues and what you can bring. Respect that they have a menu to plan, so sooner is better. Follow up with an email or text to confirm what's been agreed.

4. Plan B

If the host can't meet your needs, you'll need a backup plan involving adjusted expectations and your own food. If the situation simply won't be safe enough, you'll need to decline the invitation – perhaps hosting yourself next time.

5. Be ready to explain

If a family member doesn't know anyone with life-threatening allergies, or knows someone who outgrew them, tell them that's fortunate. Explain your child's allergy is a severe condition, which may be around for life.

6. Educate individually

Psychologist Gia Rosenblum suggests teaching relatives one at a time. If you can convert your brother and a cousin into allergy allies, you may have more sway as a group with reticent relatives.

7. Short list

Parenting coach Gina Clowes says the list of people who can provide a safe meal for your allergic child is likely to be short. However, include relatives outside that circle by encouraging them to play a game with your child or read to them.

8. Watchful eye

Before placing trust in grandpa or auntie to prepare food for your child, politely watch and offer a couple of helpful pointers. There is a learning curve.

9. Child-proofing

Ensure allergic children know who is allowed to feed them, and teach them to say, "no thank you" to food from anyone else. Also designate a special cup or bowl that a young child should use. For toddlers, some parents get T-shirts printed that simply say, "Don't feed me."

10. Tradition-breaker

If a relative is disappointed you or your child won't be trying their amazing dish, decline and divert. Speak instead of how great it is to be together – and ask for their latest news. After all, food may be nice, but family is what's important.

–Janet French