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Caring for kids with food allergies

TRIGGERED BY A KISS



While pre-schools are getting better equipped in looking out for children with allergies, parents hope that there is more support from the greater community



Amelia Teng
Assistant News Editor

Ms Candace Zhou distinctly remembers when she suspected her older daughter, Eva, was allergic to peanuts.

One of her family members had just eaten a slice of bread with peanut butter and kissed Eva, then three years old, on her cheek.

"She broke out in rashes on her face and felt itchy," says Ms Zhou, 37, a public servant.

When Eva fell asleep in their living room on another occasion,

she woke up with an itch as a result of peanut crumbs left on the couch.

And once, while overseas, she vomited and had a high fever with hives, after accidentally eating a cashew nut.

After a few tests, the family discovered Eva, who is now nine, was allergic to peanuts, tree nuts and shellfish. She also has a dust allergy.

Ms Zhou's younger daughter Matilda, who is three, was previously allergic to eggs. But she has since outgrown it after going through a home therapy programme with medical supervision.

Food allergies in children are on the rise, with hospitals recording more cases in recent years.

Egg is the top food allergen in children below two years of age, and other common allergens include cow's milk, peanut and shellfish.

Food allergies occur when the immune system wrongly identifies food proteins as being harmful and causes a reaction against them.

WHAT PRE-SCHOOLS DO

Pre-schools are now more aware of children with food allergies and how to cater to them.

My First Skool (MFS), which is operated by NTUC First Campus (NFC), has seen a wider range of food allergies and sensitivities among children in recent years,

She broke out in rashes on her face and felt itchy.



MS CANDACE ZHOU (above), on the reaction of her elder daughter Eva (second from right), then three years old, after getting a kiss from a family member who had just eaten a slice of bread with peanut butter. Eva was later diagnosed with allergies to peanuts, tree nuts and shellfish. They are seen above with Ms Zhou's husband Matthew Siew and their other children, Matilda (left) and Noah

says an NFC spokeswoman.

Parents are advised to share the medical memo from doctors on their children's allergy and what can be done in case of an allergic reaction.

"The information will be useful for our teachers to make the necessary preparations and also have the knowledge to respond to these potential situations," she says.

MFS, which has 156 centres, also has an allergy emergency response

plan that teachers follow, including taking the child to seek immediate medical attention if necessary.

"First aid training is a mandatory course for all MFS educators, and the teachers will be able to administer first aid when necessary," says the spokeswoman.

NFC's other brand, Little SkoolHouse (LSH) with 20 centres, excludes common allergens such as nuts and seafood - with the exception of fish - from its menu.

The centres work with parents to manage their children's allergies, food intake and health, says the spokeswoman.

In very severe cases, parents may provide all the meals for the child.

Children with allergies have tags sewn onto their uniforms as a visual reminder.

Ms Sharon Teo, head of pre-schools at Star Learners Child Care, says two-thirds of its 43 centres have had more children with food allergies enrolled in the past five years.

Among these centres, there is an average increase of three to five cases a centre.

Since 2018, it has worked with food manufacturing firm Tiffin Gourmet to provide allergen-free menus on top of its regular and vegetarian menus, she says.

Children with very specific allergies are allowed to bring their food from home.

She adds that children with allergies are monitored more closely and their details are prominently displayed in the pre-schools' kitchens, common dining areas and/or classrooms.

"During mealtimes, the class teachers keep a close eye on these children and make sure they do not consume any food item that is not meant for them," says Ms Teo.



Little SkoolHouse's uniform has a silver ribbon below the school logo to inform teachers that the child has an allergy.