

Churches host a variety of activities for its members, and serving food is a common theme associated with many of them. Vacation Bible School, Sunday School, and potlucks are all regular events that not only involve food, but children as well. According to Food Allergy Research and Education (FARE: www.foodallergy.org), food allergies affect up to 15 million people in the United States. The National Center for Health Statistics indicates four out of every 100 children have a food allergy, and the prevalence is increasing. This medical condition can cause life-threatening situations, especially if it is not managed properly. There are only eight foods that account for 90 percent of allergic reactions related to food in the United States: peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, wheat, soy, fish and shellfish. It is important to be aware of potential food allergies and know how to respond in an emergency.

Symptoms of an Allergic Reaction

Symptoms of an allergic reaction can range from mild to severe. Some symptoms can lead to the life-threatening condition called anaphylaxis (link to <http://www.foodallergy.org/anaphylaxis>), which can affect a person's breathing and blood circulation. While some signs may appear within a few minutes of eating an allergen, others could become evident hours later.

Mild symptoms include:

- Hives;
- Eczema;
- Redness of skin around the eyes;
- Itchy mouth or ear canal; and
- Vomiting, diarrhea or stomach pain.

Severe symptoms include:

- Swelling of lips, tongue or throat obstructing airways;
- Shortness of breath;
- Drop in blood pressure (feeling faint, confused, weak);
- Weak or "thread" pulse; and
- Loss of consciousness.

Severe symptoms, alone or in combination with milder systems, may be signs of anaphylaxis and require immediate treatment. The American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology has developed an [Anaphylaxis Emergency Action Plan](#).

Responding to an Allergic Reaction

Depending on the severity of an allergic reaction, there are various treatment and drugs to utilize when responding in an emergency. Mayo Clinic discusses some [actions and treatments](#) that can be helpful when handling an allergic reaction. For mild symptoms, those with allergies may carry over-the-counter or prescribed antihistamines to relieve itching or hives. In cases with severe symptoms, an injection of epinephrine or a visit to the emergency room may be necessary.

People with allergies often carry an epinephrine autoinjector, also known as an EpiPen. An EpiPen allows someone to inject a single dose of medication when experiencing severe allergic reaction symptoms. However, those actively suffering from an allergic reaction may not be able to administer the medication themselves. It is therefore a good idea to educate employees and volunteers on the use of an EpiPen in the event of a serious allergic reaction. For minors with known food allergies, have a discussion with their parent or guardian about responding to a reaction, and secure authorization/consent for administration of medication in an emergency situation.

Food Allergies at Church

Children attend many activities at church, including school-type activities. An allergic reaction may occur while under the supervision of the church. It is important that organizations take the necessary precautions to protect children in the event of an emergency. The National School Board Association has created a [comprehensive policy guide](#) for the management of food allergies in schools. The policy can also be utilized in church settings. The following are some ideas that can be implemented in management of food allergies:

- **Create a health service plan that identifies children with allergies.** Monitor and update this plan periodically so that it follows state and federal privacy/confidentiality laws.
- **Develop individual management plans for each child with a food allergy.** The child's plan should include a healthcare plan and emergency care plan. Individuals to include in its development should be a registered nurse, parents, nutrition staff and other healthcare providers. Regularly update plans according to the child's age.
- **Manage access to student medication.** State laws outline details for storage, access and administration, but always be sure medication is easily accessible in case of an emergency.
- **Follow all state and federal privacy and confidentiality laws in communication plans.** Also, adjust plans to meet any parent requests.
- **Provide adequate training and professional development for church staff.** For healthcare plans and emergency care plans to be effective, all personnel should be properly trained how to react in a situation.
- **Offer education and awareness resources to members.** Qualified personnel should provide information to increase the knowledge about food allergies. Parents of children with food allergies also can present valuable information.
- **Monitor and evaluate the food allergy policy.** This should be done every year at a minimum.

Protection Checklist

FARE has developed a [checklist](#) for parents in a guidance document for managing food allergies in a school setting. While the checklist is intended for parents, churches can take advantage of the information as well when developing an allergy protection plan. Consider the following:

- Become informed and educated;
- Prepare and provide information on the child's food allergy and medication;
- Build a team of individuals, such as a nurse, teachers, administrators, parents and the child's peers;
- Help ensure appropriate storage and administration of medication;
- Help reduce food allergens in the classroom;
- Consider what is being served at meals and other activities;
- Address transportation issues for the procedure of managing food allergies in vehicles going to and from off-site events;
- Plan ahead when organizing an off-site event;
- Prevent and stop bullying; and
- Assist the child with self-management.

An additional resource that may be helpful is [Life Threatening Food Allergies in School and Child Care Settings](#) developed by the British Columbia Ministry for Children and Families. It presents scenarios involving food allergies, such as snack time, recess, bullying, and discusses how such situations could be handled.

Food allergies are a serious medical concern in all environments. It is crucial to be aware of the symptoms and how to react. Furthermore, ensuring that churches, schools, parents and children are educated and aware of food allergy situations can help prevent allergic reactions,