

Parent Guide to Food Safety at Givins/Shaw

Our Anaphylaxis Prevention Approach

Dear Members of the Givins/Shaw Community,

As you are probably aware, we have a number of students at our school who have life-threatening food allergies, and we have, as a school and a community, worked to establish practices and systems to ensure that all our students are able to enjoy a safe and inclusive learning environment. You've no doubt received various communications from our school and partner organizations about how we are doing this, and you've probably been careful to follow the guidelines and requests.

But it can be so confusing. Sometimes the guidelines seem unclear, and the requests inconsistent. Which foods are safe or un-safe? What can we send to school with our kids? What are we supposed to do?

To help clarify, we've pulled together this fact-sheet, along with some responses to commonly asked questions and points of confusion.

Some Facts and Realities About Food at Our School

1. At the moment, **we have students at our school with life-threatening allergies** to the following items:

- nuts & tree nuts (peanuts, almonds, walnuts, pecans, cashews, hazelnuts, etc.)
- milk, cheese and other dairy products
- eggs
- sesame
- avocado

This list, of course, is partial and temporary. It may change as new students come into our school community every year, or as new allergies are identified.

2. **There are no universally "safe" or "un-safe" foods** -- different students have different allergies, and being careful to observe things like "no peanuts" directives is NOT the same as ensuring food safety. All anaphylactic reactions -- whether to peanuts or to any of the other foods listed above -- have the potential to be life threatening.
3. **No foods are officially banned from school.** The TDSB does not impose any food bans or restrictions, and guidelines for food safety are developed individually by school communities, like ours.
4. Lunch at Givins/Shaw happens in one half of the gym, with tables being set up for kids, by classroom, to sit and eat their lunches.

Grades 1 - 6 eat lunch from 11:40 - 12:10 and Kindergarten eat lunch from 12:10 – 12:40. We have approximately 200 students eating in the gym, and we have allotted to us 3 (three) dedicated lunch-room supervisors (not teachers). Our approximately 100 kindergarten students are in the gym with their own supervisors.

There is a much lower supervision ratio than we have during class times, so you can imagine how challenging it is to closely monitor so many students at once.

The result is that these times when **our allergic students are most at risk are also the moments at which they have the least supervision.**

5. The kids, whose natural tendency is to trade treats and share food, are all strongly encouraged and regularly reminded that, while generosity and sharing are values we all want to promote, **sharing food at lunch could be very dangerous** to some of their friends.

So, you may be asking:

What can and can't I send in my kids' lunches?

Technically, **there is no TDSB or school policy that dictates which foods you can or cannot pack in your own kids' lunch.** Nothing is actually banned from school.

However, because some of our kids have life-threatening allergies to certain foods, we as a school community ask that, as much as possible, those foods be limited (see the list of these foods, above), especially in crumbly or otherwise easily spread forms.

When you do pack a lunch with a known allergen, please remind your kids about the importance of keeping others safe by not sharing and through good hygiene practices (cleaning their hands and faces after eating).

Wait. Nothing is banned? What about peanuts?

Nope. Not even peanuts are truly banned. In fact, sometimes efforts to avoid this high-profile allergen can lead to a **false sense of food safety.**

Just because something is peanut-free does not mean it's safe for everyone.

Why the sudden change?

The policy isn't really changing, but our approach and communication around it are. **We now have more students with a wider range of life-threatening allergies.** More and more kids are eating lunch at school. We're responding, as a community, to these facts, as well as to some confusion we've all experienced around this.

I have a friend with a food allergy, and it's no big deal.

Why all the fuss?

Talking about allergies can be confusing. There's such a wide range of allergic reactions. **This note is not about general allergies or intolerances, but about anaphylaxis, a life-threatening response to allergens.** For more information about this distinction, please see Health Canada's fact sheet "Food Allergies and Intolerances."

I want to bring treats for my kids' classmates to celebrate. Is that OK?

Wherever possible, **consider non-food treats and ways to celebrate** (e.g., with music, dancing, crafts, stickers--our teachers have great ideas for how to do this). Unfortunately, life for allergic children frequently involves exclusion from particular activities (often those involving food) to ensure their safety. These children will appreciate your efforts to include them.

In any case, **before you bring any food to the school to share with others, please make sure to communicate with the classroom teacher or the principal.** They'll let you know what will work in a particular situation.

Don't the kids with allergies know to avoid foods they can't eat?

Remember that some of **our students are as young as three.** They need to rely on their teachers, peers, and others to help them stay safe in every respect. And you probably won't be surprised to learn that the risk of accidental exposure to allergens increases with age until after the teen years, as responsibilities are introduced and judgement develops. Kids will be kids. When offered a tasty-looking treat that's *almost certainly* safe, an allergic child might make a bad decision.

I'm sure the teachers and staff know all about this stuff.

Why do I need to know?

Teachers and staff are all trained to respond to emergencies, and to manage the risk of anaphylaxis, but their influence isn't absolute. If we as a school community can work **together, we can help prevent and avoid those emergencies.**

So, what can I do?

- Talk to your kids about the importance of keeping others safe by not sharing and through good hygiene practices (cleaning their hands and faces after eating).
- Limit the number of times you pack known allergens in lunch-bags.
- Consider including a damp cloth in a reusable container or a plastic baggie, with your child's lunch, and encourage them to use it after they're done eating.
- If you can, sign up to volunteer in the lunch room!

If you have more questions or would like more information about this issue at Givins/Shaw, please contact our principal, Nadira Persaud (Nadira.Persaud2@tdsb.on.ca).

Food Allergy Canada is a good source of reliable information about anaphylaxis in general (www.foodallergycanada.ca).