

# **FOOD ALLERGIES and COLLEGE: Planning for Campus Life**

A forum for high school juniors and seniors, and their parents

September 21, 2011

Newton-Wellesley Hospital, Newton, MA

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## **Panel:**

### **Campus life topics:**

#### **Eating on Campus**

- Asking about food ingredients and preparation
- Getting to know dining staff
- Dining options and policies

#### **Dorm and Social Life**

- Talking to your roommate
- Befriend your RA (resident advisor)
- Social events and parties

#### **School Health Services**

- Connecting with staff
- Planning for emergencies

- **Elisabeth Stieb**, RN, BSN, AE-C, is a nurse at Massachusetts General Hospital for Children, specializing in allergies and asthma. She is the former volunteer leader of the Food Allergy Group of the South Shore, and has raised three sons with asthma and food allergies, including successful transitions to college.
- **Laura A. De Veau**, M.Ed., is Assistant Dean of Students for Residence Life at Mount Ida College. She will discuss housing, social and other residential life issues and how a college can help students with food allergies.
- **Julie Lampie**, Registered Dietitian, is the Nutrition and Marketing Specialist at Tufts University Dining. She will discuss how to navigate college food services for students with food allergies.





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# **Food Allergies and College: Planning for Campus Life**

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## **STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

By

**Llaen Coston-Clark**

**B.A., Univ. of Connecticut, 2006; MA, Emerson College, 2010**

**Congratulations! You're applying to colleges!**

**Here are some things to consider when choosing a school:**

### **The College Tour**

Apply to colleges that best match your academic interests. You will most likely be able to work with the dining services at just about any school to accommodate your needs. While important, food service issues should be a secondary concern, and academics should be a primary concern.

While touring a college, ask current students (usually the tour guides) about the dining services—most students will be eager to either highly praise or complain about the food at their school. While food quality does matter, try to get a picture of how the school's dining services are set up.

#### ***Questions to ask:***

- “Do you eat on campus? How's the food at this school?”
- “What are the campus dining options?”
- “Do you have favorite on-campus places to eat? Which ones? What makes them so great?”

For further details about food services at the school, try to make an appointment with the appropriate person at dining services so you can ask questions. This position might vary at each school and could be a dining services manager, a director, a dietitian, or a nutritionist. Contact information might be available on the college's website, and you might have to make a few phone calls before you reach the right person.

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Try to make the appointment for the same day as your college tour by calling ahead of time so you can get all the information about the school while you are on campus. Establishing a relationship from the beginning provides you with a familiar person you can go to if anything should happen (e.g. if food ingredients are not properly labeled, if you have cross-contamination concerns). This is much easier than discovering a major food safety issue and not knowing who to turn to as you're in the midst of adjusting to college course loads and new school events.

***Questions to ask:***

- “How are the dining services set up at this school?” (Food court style? One outside vendor? Multiple outside vendors? One large, school-run dining hall? Multiple school-run dining halls?)
- “If I went to this school, who could I speak with about any obstacles I encounter because of my food allergies?” Identify the person who can, and who wants to, help you and get to know them.
- “What would you recommend I do to eat safely at this school?”
- “What dining options do I have?”

If, after speaking with the appropriate dining services person, you still have major safety concerns, or you feel as though it will be challenging to eat safely at this school, you might want to contact someone at the residential life office to discuss living and eating options in general. For some colleges, dining plans are mandatory for any students living on campus, and you don't want to pay for a dining plan if eating on campus will not be a safe option.

It is important to talk with the appropriate person at the residential life office to see if there are other living and eating options for you. For instance, there might be dorms that have a shared, community kitchen on each floor or in each wing of a residence hall, and on-campus apartments will have kitchens in each unit. It is important to ask about these options because such living arrangements might only be offered to upperclassmen and not to freshmen.

***Questions to ask:***

- “How can I be assigned a roommate who will be supportive of my food allergy needs? Is it possible to have a single room? Do I need to apply for special accommodations?”
- “Is it mandatory that I have a dining/meal plan if I live on campus?”
- “What are my living options if I will need to cook my own food? Are there residence halls with shared kitchens, or on-campus suites or apartments that would meet my needs?”
- “What are the options for grocery shopping near campus? Do I need a car to be able to buy any food on my own?”

I personally think off-campus living for freshmen is not a good idea because it separates them from the important socialization that occurs in dorm life. If the school can't accommodate the food allergic student at this stage, then perhaps it is not the best choice school in the first place.

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## **Hooray! You've chosen a school and are moving into your new dorm!**

### **Now—how do you tell others about your food allergy?**

#### **Dorm and Social Life**

***Talk to your roommate first.*** It is probably most important to first speak with your roommate about your food allergy. The last thing you want is to live with someone who unknowingly brings foods you are allergic to into your shared (and probably small) living space. To avoid a situation like this, make sure you explain your food allergy and make sure (s)he understands how serious it is.

Many new freshmen call, and even try to meet their new roommate in the summer, when they receive their assigned roommate's name and contact information from their college. Contacting your new roommate before you move is a great way to get to know each other and get a sense of what living together will be like.

Talking about your food allergy at this time, and asking your new roommate if (s)he will feel comfortable living with any restrictions you have, will save you a lot of explanation on moving day. Plus, if you discover that your new roommate's favorite food happens to be the same food you are severely allergic to, and (s)he doesn't feel comfortable accommodating your food allergy needs, you might have enough time to ask the residential life office for a new roommate assignment before the fall semester begins.

#### ***What to talk about with your roommate:***

- Explain what triggers an allergic reaction for you. (The smell of the food, skin contact with the food, eating the food.)
- Tell your roommate that you need to avoid coming into contact with the allergic food and suggest ways (s)he can help keep the food out of the shared living space.
- Even though you want to make sure the role (s)he has in keeping the living space allergen-friendly is understood, this should be an agreement that is negotiated between both of you.
- Explain how severe an allergic reaction can be. Explain what an allergic reaction would look like, so your roommate can recognize if you have one. (Symptoms: hives, itchy throat, breathing difficulty, facial swelling.)
- Tell your roommate which medications you would need to take during an allergic reaction, and where you store them (e.g. in the main compartment of your bag or backpack; additional medication in your desk drawer).
- Tell/show your roommate how to administer emergency medication to you in the event of a severe allergic reaction. Also explain that (s)he must call 9-1-1 so you can receive additional help.
- Keep in mind that all of this information might be overwhelming to your new roommate. Be sure to ask how (s)he feels about the situation, and address any concerns or questions. Ask your roommate if (s)he will be able to keep the living space allergen-friendly with you. If all of this is too much for your roommate to handle, and it doesn't seem like living together is good for either of you, knowing that as early as possible gives you time to try to get a new roommate assignment.

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***Next, talk to your RA.*** After you move into your new dorm with your new roommate, you should tell your RA (resident assistant) about your food allergy. In the event of an emergency, your RA will be better able to help you if (s)he is already aware of your allergy.

Also, RAs typically organize social events in residence halls, so keeping your RA aware of your food allergy might be an advantage if it can influence the types of foods included in some events. At the very least, you could try to work with your RA to find a way to participate while avoiding contact with allergens. (Event examples: ice cream sundae social, roll-your-own sushi night, non-alcoholic “mocktail” party.)

***What you should tell your RA will be similar to what you told your roommate:***

- Explain your food allergy and what triggers an allergic reaction.
- Explain how severe an allergic reaction can be. Explain what an allergic reaction would look like, so your RA can recognize if you have one.
- Tell your RA what medications you would need to take during an allergic reaction, and where you store them (e.g. in the main compartment of your bag or backpack; additional medication in your desk drawer).
- Tell/show your RA how to administer emergency medication to you in the event of a severe allergic reaction. Also explain that (s)he must call 9-1-1 so you can receive additional help.
- Make sure your RA knows that you have also discussed your food allergy with your roommate.
- Ask your RA if you can be informed ahead of time of any events that involve food in general, or food you are allergic to in particular. (Keep in mind that RAs are busy people and might not remember to do this, but if yours does, it will be a nice bonus!)

## **Socializing and Having Fun**

As you adjust to college life, make new friends, and have fun at social events, the last thing you might want to do is think about your food allergy. However, avoiding a severe allergic reaction is worth reminding yourself that you have a serious food allergy and that you should always bring your medication with you, wherever you go. You certainly wouldn’t want to be stuck at an event or party where you could easily come into contact with the food your allergic to and not have any “back up” medication handy (e.g. dishes of peanuts).

You might be accustomed to always carrying your medication with you nowadays, but it is easy to forget bringing it with you everywhere on a college campus—especially when all you might need is your college ID to get around campus. Usually, students’ college IDs serve as their residence hall key cards, their dining/meal plan cards, and can be used to get into many campus buildings.

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**Reminders:**

- Bring your medication with you *everywhere you go*, on a daily basis. That includes your classes, wherever you eat, the gym, your friends' dorms, the laundry room, the study lounge, the library, the student union, and simply walking around or studying outside.
- Don't forget to bring your medication with you to social events and parties. Make sure there is enough space in a jacket pocket, backpack, or clutch/purse to fit your medication.
- If it is possible, make sure that at least one person you are socializing with (at an event or party, at a movie, or out to dinner) knows about your food allergy and knows how to use your medication. This is easy to accomplish if you are socializing with close friends and/or your roommate (those with whom you've already discussed your food allergy).
- It might be easier to have multiple medications kept in multiple places or bags/backpacks. That way, you won't worry about whether or not you transferred all of your medication from one bag to another (e.g. school bag to gym bag). If you have medication in each bag you typically use, and in a drawer in your room, you are "covering many bases."
- Occasionally, check that your medications are up-to-date. Replace them promptly when they expire.

**Additional considerations:****Health Services**

In case you experience an allergic reaction, or if you simply need to obtain a medication prescription, knowing where to go beforehand can save you a lot of time and hassle. Many colleges offer health services at an on-campus clinic where doctors and nurse practitioners treat students. Some clinics might also provide an on-campus pharmacy.

During your college tour, ask your tour guide what students do when they need medical treatment. You could also try to make an appointment with one of the doctors or nurse practitioners at the clinic to ask them about the treatment they provide in the event of an allergic reaction.

If it is possible, it might be helpful to locate an allergist in the region and find out if you could become a patient at that practice. That way, even if the on-campus clinic closes on weekends or holidays, you will always have a doctor nearby to provide treatment and prescribe medication.

Of course, the method of healthcare you choose is entirely up to you. Establishing a dependable healthcare provider *before* classes begin is fundamental to being prepared and having less to worry about later.

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## **Eating on Campus**

You should approach on-campus dining (in dining halls or other types of food establishments) as you would off-campus, restaurant dining—don't assume it's 100% safe. It is still important to ask about food ingredients and preparation, and to be aware of cross-contamination. Even though many dining services enforce ingredient labeling of the foods they serve, don't hesitate to ask any questions if you are unsure about the accuracy of the label or how the food was prepared.

Also, take time to get to know the food service staff. This might be easier to accomplish in a dining hall setting with consistent staff, versus a food court setting with various vendors or cuisine staff. The more familiar they are with you, the more likely they can and will offer to help whenever you may need it. Additionally, being on friendly terms with one or two staff members could make asking any questions you have feel more like casual chatting and less like constant nagging.

## **You'll do great!**

In choosing the right school for you, ask questions, learn about your options, and establish connections with those who can help you. Don't hesitate to discuss your food allergy needs and concerns with others—it will make your college experience more comfortable and, hopefully, safer.



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## **College/University Perspective**

by

**Julie Lampie, Registered Dietitian  
Nutrition and Marketing Specialist, Tufts University**

### **Questions to be Asked by College Dining Administration to Assess the Needs of Food Allergic Students**

1. What are the specific food allergens that need to be avoided?
2. At what age was the food allergy diagnosed?
3. What are the symptoms experienced if a food allergen is inadvertently ingested?
4. What is the status of carrying epinephrine injection device (Epi-Pen® or TwinJect®)?
5. What is the history of food allergic reactions?
6. What is a typical diet for the entire day and what specific foods are avoided?
7. Who has been responsible for food shopping and preparation?
8. How often is food consumed outside the home?

### **Students Need To Ask**

1. Are food ingredients readily available at the point of service? On-line?
2. Are menus on-line?
3. Are french fries fried in the same oil as other foods?
4. What is the potential for cross-contamination?
5. Who are the contact persons in the dining facility if questions arise about food ingredients and preparation?
6. What food allergy training is conducted for the dining staff?
7. What options are available if there is nothing to eat at a particular meal?
8. What kind of emergency response is in place in case of an allergic reaction?

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## **Parents Need to Ask**

1. Assess the knowledge of the point person responsible for meeting with food allergic students and families and the degree of experience the college/university food service has in dealing with food allergic clientele by asking the following:
  - What precautionary measures are in place (e.g., labeling, separate cooking equipment)?
  - Number of students dining with them who have food allergies?
  - What type of allergen training of personnel is offered and how often?
  - Who is the main person responsible for dealing with food allergies?
  - What is the history of food allergic reactions?
  - What emergency procedures are in place in case of food allergic reactions?
  - What accommodations are the food service willing to provide, including providing specific foods, meal plan reductions or exemptions?
  
2. Students and parents should visit the dining facilities on campus to get a sense how food is prepared and served.



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## **PARENT PERSPECTIVES**

### **Parent Perspective #1      By Michele Carrick, MSW**

Here are some suggestions for planning for the safety of a college student with food allergies, at various steps along the way:

- You can obtain some of the information you need by contacting various schools *prior to making a visit.*
  - *When you visit* schools, take along a list of questions, schedule appointments in advance with key staff, and leave time to look at and try out some campus eating places.
  - *When you choose to enroll in a school, and when you arrive in the fall,* make specific arrangements with the appropriate personnel for any special accommodations that may be needed.
1. Find out how the food services system is set up. (I.e., what is the hierarchy - director, managers, other personnel, etc.?) Contact the director to find out what policies and procedures they currently have in place. The two key issues that need to be addressed are AVOIDANCE and TREATMENT if an allergic reaction occurs.
  2. Find out where the students eat. Is there a cafeteria in the dorm or are there a number of cafeterias? Students usually prefer the cafeteria in their dorms so they can eat with other students on their floor, and they also may want to eat at a cafeteria near where they take their classes, if it is a large campus.
  3. Check the menu and identify “red flags.”
  4. Ask to tour the kitchen facility (behind the scenes) to be able to identify areas of concern.
  5. Identify a point person for your student to speak with regarding any concerns and questions (day and night).

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6. Think about your own "food allergy action plan." For example, once you identify which cafeteria/cafeterias your student will most likely use, set up an appointment with the director or manager and bring a list of foods which need to be avoided.

A safe plan for the student should include student health, nutritional services if needed, cafeteria personnel, housing (re: roommate issues), and any other department which might be involved in coordinating services to that student.

Walk through your "plan" and view this as a partnership between the school and you and your student. Once things are in place, your student will have to deal with it on his/her own.

7. Make sure you and your student have met with the appropriate dining room staff so they can identify your student. Sometimes a photo helps.

8. Find out how your student will get information regarding ingredients in food that is served. When there is a change in menu or ingredients, how will that information be obtained?

9. Find out the protocol for an allergic reaction. (E.g., who calls 911, does the local ambulance service carry and administer epinephrine, does someone accompany the student, who contacts the parents? Where would the student be brought if a severe allergic reaction occurs? What is the school's policy regarding the dissemination of medical information to the family?)

10. Is there only one person in the cafeteria who can administer epinephrine or are all personnel trained? Do they know how to identify anaphylaxis?

11. Identify other high risk areas where food can be a factor (e.g., dorm and social events, athletics, orientation program), and set up a plan to address those issues.

**Other considerations:**

- If your student has severe food allergies, consider setting up accommodations which will protect your student. This is a formal process that has to be done through the school's program or department that deals with all disabilities.
- If there are concerns regarding anxiety, make sure the campus counselors are identified and an initial appointment is in place.

## **Parent Perspective #2      Elisabeth Stieb, RN, BSN, AE-C**

### ***I'd like to share our strategy when visiting colleges and my son's successful experience as a freshman:***

When looking at schools we contacted a school via the food services department first. If it sounded as if they had some experience with food allergies, or an actual policy or program, we continued in the process. This ruled out several schools quite quickly.

We made arrangements to visit anyone involved with dietary services when we were visiting a school. By email we would contact the director of food services to let them know when we would be on campus. University of Vermont and Skidmore were exceptional - both their understanding of food allergies and in their willingness to accommodate Matthew's needs.

Matthew ended up at Trinity University in Texas. When he decided that this was the school, we contacted Trinity's Office of Disability Services. He had to complete and submit an application. We provided documentation of his allergies and a letter from his allergist.

Then it was a very remote process in that we did not know what was happening. There was not much communication between the disability services and us. When Matt received his room assignment he was in a single room, with 2 minifrig/microwaves, in a dorm which had a full kitchen. This was more than we had asked for.

We met the food service director, purchasing director and head chef when he interviewed last October. They were wonderful. Communication was key throughout the process.

Several days prior to moving in we called the food service director to arrange a meeting sometime that week. When we arrived at the meeting, there were eight staff to meet Matt: the director, catering manager, nutritionist, purchasing manager, chefs, servers, etc. We were both amazed.

Food has not been as difficult as we had both imagined it might be. After a month in school, Matt said, "the food allergy stuff is going well. It is just not that good." I told him that would make him like any freshman in any college!

## Parent Perspective #3

## A Massachusetts Mom (Anonymous)

*As a concerned parent of a son with a peanut allergy I would like to share the following information on our experiences with the college process.*

My son selected a university in North Carolina. We had discussed his peanut allergy and how it might impact his housing and meals on campus. The concern was how to be safe in his room and not be exposed to peanut or nut products of a roommate. We did not want this to become a confrontational issue.

My son was very reluctant to identify himself to the university as having an allergy. However, we called the housing office and they suggested he fill out the disability forms. It required a doctor's statement to verify the allergy, and there was a deadline to submit necessary paperwork. When his disability status was approved, the university was very willing to work with us on his special circumstances. For example, when room assignments were given out he had first chance to select a single room. His older sister, a college graduate, highly recommended he accept the single, to eliminate any of the freshman roommate issues. He was reluctant; however, now that four months have passed he is very glad to have a single.

Food on campus has not been an issue. At an incoming parent's meeting at the start of freshmen year it was suggested he contact the university nutritionist. He did so and discussed with her any food items in dining halls that might pose a problem.

Another issue was the need for some kind of medic alert ID. My son was not willing to wear the metal bracelets. He has had them, but they came off for showers and working out and never went back on. We heard about a new product mentioned by George Hincapie who raced in the Tour de France, and checked it out on-line. The site is [www.xtremesportsid.com](http://www.xtremesportsid.com). The ID is a silicone bracelet, available in colors and camouflage pattern, with the medic alert insignia, an 800 number, and a personal number. We purchased one and he has not taken it off. Friends have asked where they can get one – the biggest compliment of all. At the freshman parent meeting in the fall, campus security was also in attendance. I asked whether they would be able to spot this type of ID bracelet and was informed that it is one of the first things they look for in an emergency.

So far my son has been safe, and as a parent I am not as concerned as I would have been had we not taken the extra steps. Most colleges and universities are more than willing to help kids with allergies. Don't hesitate to ask!