

Living Well with Food Allergies

a 10-minute audio documentary

Audio plays from a professional wrestling match: the wrestlers grunt, the crowd whoops and hollers.

NARRATOR

You're listening to a professional wrestling match. They bounce off the ropes, jump and tumble, performing the kind of melodramatic feats you'd expect from pro wrestling. In the background, an American flag is painted waving across half the wall. Standing watchfully in the corner of the ring is the referee, Sean Patrick O'Brien. A little over a year after this video was made, Sean would be dead – at the age of 34. The cause? Anaphylaxis. Sean was allergic to peanuts.

Music

NARRATOR

Stories like this strike an icy fear in the hearts of parents whose children have a food allergy. In all the dangers new parents plan for when they bring home their new baby, the grocery run tends to be low on the list of concerns and dangers. But when a food allergy is diagnosed, suddenly a door is opened to a whole new funhouse of horrors as the family learns to adapt to the threat of something most people find innocuous. Fortunately, deaths from food allergy anaphylaxis, like Sean's, are rare, but learning to balance the risk is a tricky line to walk.

DR. HELEN

I'm Doctor Helen Howells and I'm a GP who specialised in allergies.

... So actually, if you're going through your life not really worrying about your food allergies, as long as you're safe to some extent, you're probably living a better place than the people super anxious. But of course the other end we worry about is the people who are too flippant, who do no checks, never carry EPI pens. Because when you look at who dies — and I reinforce still rare — 50% are in deaths of people who thought their allergies were only mild.

Usually if you have something called a cofactor present: so if you are ill on the day you eat the food, you're stressed, you're around your period, alcohol, fatigue, running around, exercising, heat, cold, poorly controlled asthma, a big one — that's a trigger for anaphylaxis. Whereas another day it might just be hives. And so you can't define the severity of somebody's immediate allergy.

NARRATOR

While there are many unknown variables in food allergy, science is making strides each year, learning more about how to prevent, manage, and treat food allergy.

DR. HELEN

We saw that, you know, the rates of peanut allergy seem to be increasing despite the fact we tried lots of public health interventions. So then they look to Israel and it was in around 2008, and saw that, well, these children are fed Bamba sticks, which are peanut puffs, basically. And yet their rate of allergies are extremely low. So from that developed a huge study which was double blinded. It was a very good quality study and they ...

Continue Dr. Helen underneath narration

NARRATOR

Dr. Helen explains how the study worked, and that the results offered some helpful insights for dealing with food allergies.

DR. HELEN

... So even though some are consuming it regularly, allergy can still form. Now, interestingly, in Australia they're a lot better with their public health message around the regular consumption. And yet they have not seen that it has affected their rates of allergy forming, which I think is fascinating. So even though we can see it's important, it doesn't seem to be the whole story. So my hypothesis is is it that children in Israel are just having small regular consumption that is raising their threshold rather than lots of it all the time?

NARRATOR

Dr. Helen looks forward to the results of some upcoming research probing this idea. Not only could it offer hope to those who have food allergies, it could also offer clinicians more detailed information about desensitisation protocols.

DR. HELEN

...I do something called immunotherapy. So I help children with food allergies desensitise, raise their threshold of how much peanut, for instance, they could eat before a reaction occurs.

NARRATOR

And her hypothesis is informed by her work and her own experience.

DR. HELEN

... but my mum, from having heard me lecture now said, "Oh, you had an egg allergy when you were younger. That's what that was!" You know, in the old days, because we know that rates of allergies gone up, was it just that people go 'oh, just try it again' and they didn't really have it as much on their radar. So they just kept trying, which is what happened with my mum with egg. But of course, I'm not just saying everyone should go and do it because there's safety — you know, we some people have extremely severe reactions.

Music.

NARRATOR

But while new research continues to shed light on why a food allergy develops, and how it can be avoided or treated, those who are living with a food allergy face an assortment of challenges.

EMMA

I mean, allergies are just kind of an inconvenience in general, and especially with food, and it's something severe to have a peanut allergy which with like anaphylaxis being the results. So it's not the most enjoyable to have like death be an option after everything you eat.

NARRATOR

This is Emma Hymen, a high school senior with a severe nut allergy.

EMMA

The way, when I figured out I was allergic to peanuts, it was in the 3rd grade and we're making bird feeders. And it was orange peels and like spread peanut butter and bird seed in them. And I like, rub my eyes with the peanut butter and like, my whole face swelled up. And then more recently, my mother brought home some baklava. I just have a peanut allergy, not a nut allergy, so I can eat baklava, generally speaking. However, this one didn't have any labels on it and she asked the store specifically if there were peanuts, and they said no — and turns out it was entirely peanut baklava and I ate it and it was not a good result. I feel like it just requires a lot more caution when eating out or going anywhere.

Actuality from the market rises from under the last statement.

CLARA

I've just come up to Greenwich Market for some lunch today, and as I'm walking around the smells coming from each of the booths is enticing to say the least, and it's very lively. There's lots of people out, lots of vendors, lots of choices. But I don't have a food allergy. So let's just take a stroll past some of the stalls here. Here's some Indian — they do have a sign about talking to staff if you have any allergies or intolerances. Ethiopian, that happens to be my favourite one at the market, generally. But of course the trick that you learn as you live with a nut allergy is that sometimes what may not be obvious is still something that you have to be wary about. Maybe the fry oil that they use is peanut oil.

NARRATOR

But while some food allergies have gained familiarity in the broader public, some allergies are much less common. High school senior Mabel Vilt has a pineapple allergy.

MABEL

Pineapple seems very good from what other people say, and it's sad not to be able to experience it. I kinda remember my family gaslighting me that like, 'oh, that's just what pineapple does sometimes, it's fine.' I was like, 'I don't think so.' It took a couple of times of eating it for them to actually admit, 'ok, maybe you're allergic.'

NARRATOR

It's not just Mabel's parents who missed the signs of food allergy.

DR. HELEN

My eldest son, who's 16, had milk and nut allergies when he was younger, and eczema. And at the time I was a GP trainee, so still qualified but very quickly realised I really knew nothing about allergies. And he had anaphylaxis several times to cow's milk. But I, as strange as it sound, didn't actually realise it was anaphylaxis. So he had profuse coughing, hives and swelling. And so when I recounted this to his consultant and he said, 'oh, that's anaphylaxis.' I said no, it's not it, you know, he wasn't collapsed.

NARRATOR

Her son's allergy quite literally altered the course of Dr. Helen's career.

DR. HELEN

... I've been the chair of the primary care group of the British Society of Allergy. I'm an Anaphylaxis UK trustee, and I have my own private clinic now seeing adults and children. So I've really become extremely passionate about allergies because of my son. I always say to people, because there's this huge tendency for families to feel extraordinary guilt when it comes to allergies, particularly. And now I say, well, A) don't worry, I told my child he wasn't having anaphylaxis because I thought was mucking around. And B) I always say to my children, and it's not to be flippant, but the alternative is you're not born, because we're all born with genetic risk, and you can't change the lot you're given in life. So it's how can you manage that and live your best life.

CLARA

I appreciate that that you acknowledge there's a lot of parent guilt. I've even had people say to me because my son has a peanut allergy — because I'm a vegetarian I ate a lot of peanut butter while I was pregnant — and I've had people say, 'well, that's probably why.' And I wonder if you run into a lot of parents who feel like, is it something I did or didn't do?

DR. HELEN

Totally, all the time. But I work with a psychologist in my business, and she always says guilt is meant to have a purpose, that you're meant to change your behaviour. But you didn't deliberately set out to cause your child harm because you ate peanuts. That's a perfectly normal thing to do. And I say to families, you know, obviously you want to keep your child safe moving into adulthood. If you don't eat out with them, they have nothing to — hang on to 'how do I navigate eating in a restaurant.' Just like

you're teaching them how to cross a road, you need to teach them how to eat out, how to travel.

Music starts low under the following and drives to the end.

EMMA

I really want to travel to like Southeast Asia — so like Vietnam or Thailand — and having a peanut allergy makes it very difficult to travel to those places since there's lots of peanuts in their cuisine.

NARRATOR

But both Emma and Mabel seem to have a sense of levity about their food allergies.

MABEL

... I can't make pineapple upside down cake. No pina coladas. Which is unfortunate because they are delicious.

EMMA

So just coladas?

MABEL

Yeah, just the coladas.

Laughter.

NARRATOR

Living with food allergies presents certain challenges and hurdles that change as the person with that allergy grows and matures. But just as with any challenge, obstacle, or chronic condition, living well with food allergies is achievable.

Music up and out.