

Study: Food allergies more common, more severe among children

By **Elizabeth Landau**, CNN
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COURTESY KATHY HOM

B.J. Hom, center, died of an allergic reaction in 2008. His brothers Brandon, left, and Steven also have susceptibility to allergies.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Study: 8% of American children have food allergies
- Older children tend to have more severe reactions
- People at risk of food-allergic reactions must carry an epinephrine auto-injector

Join us Friday from 1-2 p.m. E.T. for a Twitter chat about food allergies with allergist Dr. Clifford Bassett. Tweet your questions to @cnnhealth with the hashtag #cnnallergy

(CNN) -- "Dad, my throat hurts. Can you get me some cough drops?" B.J. Hom asked his father, Brian.

Brian had no idea those would be the last words he would hear his son say.

The Hom family had just arrived at a resort in Los Cabos, Mexico, to celebrate B.J.'s high school graduation and 18th birthday. But while Brian went to get cough drops at the gift shop, B.J. collapsed, his lips blue and his face pale, gasping for breath. He died that night from an allergic reaction, probably to unnoticed peanuts in a dessert from the dinner buffet.

"It was like someone reached in and ripped our hearts out," said Brian Hom of San Jose, California.

Since then, Hom has been speaking about the dangers of food allergies and educating people about protecting themselves and their children from a possible deadly reaction.

A new study in the journal *Pediatrics* reaffirms this [growing problem of food allergies among young people](#). Researchers found that 8% of children under 18 in the United States have at least one food allergy. In the past, estimates had ranged from 2% to 8%, adding to the growing body of evidence that increasingly more children have food allergies.

Even more striking, among those with food allergies, about 39% had a history of severe reaction and 30% were allergic to multiple foods.

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The most common food allergen was peanuts, followed by milk and shellfish.



"Sometimes when people think of food (allergies), they think of rash or stomach ache. What I don't think people understand is that it can be life-threatening. You can have a severe reaction and end up in the hospital and even die of food allergy," said Dr. Ruchi Gupta, associate professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and lead author of the study. (Gupta is no relation to CNN Senior Medical Correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta.)

Unfortunately, although allergists can identify people at risk for reacting to particular foods, [there is no test](#) to determine who is most likely to suffer a severe reaction and who will respond with only mild symptoms. There also is no cure for food allergies; the course of action is to avoid the offending foods and [carry an epinephrine auto-injector](#) in case of emergency.

Food allergy help for grown-ups

Hom regrets having had a somewhat lax attitude toward allergies in the past.

B.J. had never been tested for food allergies, but he knew from his experience with fish -- and the hives he'd get when eating peanuts -- that he should avoid certain foods. He seemed to manage these relatively mild reactions with antihistamines and did not carry an epinephrine auto-injector.

"We always heard the stories, but we thought every time he'd get a reaction it would be these hives or itchy throat and he'd just feel uncomfortable," Hom said. "We thought, OK, then, we're safe. You don't think it could get to the fatal stage."

After B.J.'s death in July 2008, Hom had his other sons, Brandon and Steven, tested for food allergies. They both tested positive for peanut allergy, which may have explained why Steven broke out in hives after eating the same dessert from the buffet that led to his brother's death.

"For a child with food allergies, it's almost a nightmare to be at a buffet," Gupta said. There's no telling what ingredients are in the foods, or whether they've had contact with allergens in the kitchen, or even if the serving implements have had contact with various offending foods, he said.

The Homs make sure to have an epinephrine auto-injector around all the time for Steven, who is now 15. But Brandon, 18, says he doesn't need to carry one, because he had no reaction to an oral test for peanut allergy.

B.J.'s experience also reflects a trend, shown in Gupta's research, that children experience more severe allergic reactions as they get older. Gupta believes that's not because the allergy itself is getting worse, but rather because parents are less able to monitor their children's eating habits as they get older and become more independent. [Food allergies even make kids a target of bullies.](#)

"Teenagers find it 'not cool' to carry an auto-injector," said Dr. Clifford Bassett, director of Allergy & Asthma Care of New York and member of the public education committee for the [American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology](#). There's a sense of embarrassment associated with food allergies for teens in particular, especially when they have to decline a kiss from a date who has just eaten peanuts or other offending foods.

The new research found that Asian and black children are more likely

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to have food allergies than white children, yet white children are more likely to get a confirmed diagnosis than Asian, black and Hispanic children. Those who came from regions outside the Midwest were also more likely to have food allergies. Children in households with an income of less than \$50,000 had less of a chance of having food allergies.

It's hard to know what to make of these disparities, Bassett said. They could reflect differences in access to health care -- those with higher incomes may have more means to seek diagnostic tests, for instance -- but more research is needed to confirm these associations.

The study found that food allergies were more severe among boys than girls, among children 2 and younger, and among those with multiple food allergies.

The study, which included data about more than 38,000 children, does have limitations. Participating parents supplied their own information about their children, and researchers did not confirm diagnoses of the children with doctors.

The bottom line: If you suspect you or your child has a food allergy, get tested by a certified allergist. If your allergist tells you to avoid certain foods, make sure you read labels on everything you eat, ask about all ingredients at restaurants and carry an epinephrine auto-injector. Work with your doctor to develop a [food allergy action plan](#).

Hom has resolved to spread the word about the seriousness of food allergies. He speaks frequently on the topic, and he is promoting a [memorial 5K race in San Jose in honor of his son in October](#).

"I hope one day we will find a cure and that we can find the cause," he said, "so that the future generation will not have to live in fear of going out to eat."

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FemalePublic

SO SAD



SHOULD YOU ALWAYS CARRY AN ALLERGY PEN ON YOU JUST FOR EMERGENCIES ?????

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whitespatula

They should do a study. I think the children (of wealthier families, in particular) who are given the same fat-free, sugar-free, gluten-free, taste-free, trendy diet that mommy and daddy may adhere to, will likely have more food allergies and weaker immune systems. They should also look at those who... [more](#)

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Guest

I know I'm going to get beat up for saying this, but could the number of allergic kids be increasing because fearful parents won't expose them to anything they MIGHT be allergic to? My 3 year old niece still hasn't been allowed by her mother to have anything with peanuts in it, and when it happens,... [more](#)

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hah424

While we're on the topic, why are those epi-pens so expensive? Many insurances won't cover them, because they say that food allergies are preventable if you just stay away from the food you're allergic to. If it were that easy, no one would need the pens! I have friends who are allergic, but don... [more](#)

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OvernOut

I've seen adults bully kids with allergies, too. I don't understand that at all, and they are worse than the kids because they are physically bigger, and can really throw their weight around.

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albuterol

My godson has had other kids at school rub peanut butter on his arms to watch the blistering rash. My goddaughter had a kid throw peanuts in her face in an attempt trigger a reaction. No expulsions resulted. I have to wonder how many food-allergy related deaths are caused by bullies.

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briannak3891

Growing up as a child with food allergies I can say from experience that a lax attitude about the allergy is quickly abandoned after your first experience with the allergy on your own. Many food manufacturers, airlines, and peers do not understand the severity of the allergies and decide it is their... [more](#)

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Jarry051967

Dairy products and peanuts are of questionable nutritional value in the first place. Processed food is a trap that's easy to fall into. When you eat anything that has been processed you have no idea what you might be in your mouth. It's up to the processor and there are just too many chances for som... [more](#)

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TXFamily

There is a cure for Food Allergies...at least in some cases. My 6 year old daughter who was deathly allergic to peanuts has decreased her allergic reaction by 85%, through a process called 'desensitization'. It is not practiced by many allergists yet, but there is one in Dallas who treats all type... [more](#)

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usacitizen67

Good to hear people trying to help themselves through their own health issues rather than expecting society to bend to meet their needs...

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sam1824

I believe it is worth trying to try desensitization. As a toddler, I used to be allergic to eggs. My parents were told by an allergist to try to feed me small amounts of egg and slowly increase it when I became tolerant of the small dose. I am glad it worked for me because I enjoy eating eggs.

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TXFamily

I also wanted to mention that they treat adults and teenagers as well. Some allergists are doing this type of work in clinical trials, but Wasserman is doing it as a treatment now. The recently celebrated their 100th successful completion of the program. Also, some people are not able to make it ... [more](#)

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Thomas2009

MrJefferson- I don't think anyone is suggesting children or any human should die to prevent/limit genetic defects. I would not agree with that opinion either. The person was making an observation as to the possible reason these allergies are on the increase. In any case, I suspect it is the steril... [more](#)

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Juliap973

My son is deathly allergic to milk in all forms, including casein and whey. It doesn't matter if they're cooked, processed, pasteurized or raw, it will kill him. We must carry an Epi-Pen and liquid Benadryl at all times in case of an emergency. Having him at school is a nightmare for me, it's a cons... [more](#)

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marusik

So sad that this kind of allergic reactions may cause dead, particularly in juveniles. I have a friend who is allergic to bee sting, so he learned the hard way to always carry the auto-injector. It have saved his life at least a couple of times, since I remember spending time together in his farm...

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sezyou

I think that there are lots of people who still don't get it.

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LizabethY

Ironically, those of us with PA children are often judged for being overly cautious. Now, the Hom family is being judged for not being cautious enough. Enough judgment! Many of the comments on here are horrible, and clearly miss the point. I wonder whether these people are really that cruel behi... [more](#)

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gremlinus

And thank you LizabethY, for your answer as well.

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gremlinus

well, ajkf--most of what I've commented on has been jerks blaming people for tragic events and what turned out to be a rather long discussion of a misinterpretation of a comment a loooong time ago. The rest of it has been general allergy info which I am familiar with. Just because I don't have a pe... [more](#)

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LizabethY

PA = Peanut Allergy

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ajkf

Peanut Allergy. Why, gremlinus, do you have so much to say on this board when you obviously don't have a lot of first hand knowledge about the topic?

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gremlinus

PA children?

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Honorfirst

I think that some of the problem could be the chemicals and the altering of the food during farming or production to make it better, bigger, or "healthier". My mother is allergic to a lot of foods. Horrible reactions to the foods. She can eat some of them if they are cooked. We think that it is the ... [more](#)

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WossamattaU

when you go into a stupid group like in facebook (which isn't possible here because of the format), i do get very annoyed because people are so dang stupid. but here, it's all \$hits and giggles. it is amazing how people blame the parents. i bet that kid had a higher chance of dying in a car accid... [more](#)

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gremlinus

NONcorrect, thank you. -ose is a sugar. Sorry.

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