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We all know about children with severe nut allergies. But what happens when they grow up? Most of the time, allergies last for life, requiring constant diligence, caution and an ever-present EpiPen

When a kiss can kill

STORIES BY LISA GRACE MARR

Kim Short is a myth buster.

MYTH NO. 1: Anaphylaxis happens only to young people.

BUSTED: Short was diagnosed with a severe allergy to nuts five years ago, at age 38.

MYTH NO. 2: You can never outgrow nut allergies.

BUSTED: Upon further testing, Short was told she was severely allergic to almonds and hazelnuts. Two years later she lost her allergy to almonds. Researchers are now finding some patients, particularly those with mild allergies, may be able to outgrow them.

MYTH NO. 3: Anaphylaxis won't ever happen to me.

BUSTED: A colleague of Short's was stung by a bee at work. She started to feel "funny." Short immediately called 911, suspecting anaphylaxis even though her colleague said she didn't have any allergies. Good thing she called. Her colleague went into anaphylactic shock in the emergency department. Now she carries an EpiPen

(an emergency needle containing life-saving epinephrine).

Short, a 43-year-old Hamilton educator, is eager to share her story because she said it raises awareness about the increasing prevalence and seriousness of severe allergies.

Dr. Judah Denburg, executive director of the AllerGen Network, a medical research centre based at McMaster University, said Canadian research has found 1 to 3 per cent of school children have food allergies.

"That's a big, big jump from a fraction two decades ago."

Much of the awareness around severe food allergies is aimed at protecting children. Yet the mean age of those who died from anaphylaxis in Ontario between 1986 and 2000 clearly shows that adults are also at risk. The study of 63 deaths due to anaphylaxis found 32 were food-related, 21 due to bee stings and 10 due to medication. The mean age of peanut/nut deaths was 21, other food deaths, 41, insect sting, 54.6.

While Short did "get over" her al-

mond allergy, for most peanut/nut allergy sufferers, the allergy is for life. If such allergies are on the rise among children, it stands to reason that they mark a new generation of people who will require the rest of us to know more about anaphylaxis as they go off to university or college or enter the workforce.

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STEPHANIE NAIRN

That's easier said than done. Stephanie Nairn, 18, is in her first year of studies at McMaster University.

She has a severe allergy to peanuts and nuts and says she checks labels

instinctively. She's not anxious about her allergies, but she's wary.

"(Peanuts and nuts are) in everything there (at McMaster). I'll be studying at the student centre and there will be someone eating a peanut butter sandwich right next to me," she said. "I can smell it, so I move away. There is also the chance of my hands getting contaminated from the tables, the (staircase) railings, everywhere. I wash my hands constantly. You have to watch yourself."

Nairn said she tells her friends about her allergy and shows them where she keeps her EpiPen.

But sometimes it's uncomfortable, like when she started dating and wasn't sure if her boyfriend was intending to kiss her or not.

"I just had to tell him, 'Look if you're going to kiss me you need to know something.' Now he's paranoid and he doesn't eat any nuts."

The seriousness of the request hit home with Nairn and her boyfriend when they heard of the tragic case of a 15-year-old Edmonton girl who died

last November after kissing her boyfriend, who was unaware of her allergy and had eaten peanut butter that day.

Burlington's Cheryl Caldwell, who has had a nut allergy all her life and a daughter with a similar allergy, has remained reaction-free by taking her meals wherever she goes — church potluck suppers, dinners at a friend's, it doesn't matter

If her family is planning a night out, she calls the restaurant ahead of time to make sure there are no hazards awaiting her.

It sounds simple, but it really is her best defence.

The Ontario study found that 19 of the food-related reactions occurred away from home and 12 were in restaurants.

"You just accept it," said Caldwell. "You don't limit yourself as to what you do ... you just have to be very vigilant. It's a nut world."

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