

Managing **FOOD** **ALLERGIES** at Church

By Lisa Ann Thomson

A youth activity on a chilly night in January 2017 changed the Sorenson family forever. Terry and Jenilyn’s son Tanner was 14 years old. The combined activity was wrapping up. A leader was offering the last of the refreshments. Tanner, who was allergic to peanuts, grabbed a cookie and bit into it. He shouldn’t have. It was a peanut butter cookie.

“He was usually so careful,” Terry says.

Tanner managed to get home—his house was just down the street from their meetinghouse. But he lost consciousness quickly after. He stopped breathing. Paramedics and emergency room staff fought valiantly for him. But unfortunately their efforts were not successful.

Tanner passed away that night because of his food allergy.



A Worldwide Issue

Globally, about five percent of children have a food allergy.¹ In the United States, approximately four percent of adults and up to eight percent of children have an allergy,² with similar numbers reported in European and some Asian countries.³ In a ward of 200 adults, that’s about 8 people, and in a Primary of 50, that’s 4 children.

More than 170 foods have been identified as potential allergens, but in the United States the “Big 8” account for the majority of food allergies: milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, and crustacean shellfish.⁴ Regionally, other foods top the list of allergens, such as chickpeas in India, buckwheat in South Korea and Japan, and ant eggs in Northern Thailand. Cow’s milk and eggs are



consistently among the most prevalent food allergens worldwide.⁵

An allergic reaction occurs when the body's immune system overreacts to a substance it perceives as a threat. The most severe of these reactions is anaphylaxis, which is a rapid, systemic response that can cause death.⁶ Symptoms can include tingling or itching in the mouth; swelling of the lips, face, tongue, or other body parts; nausea or vomiting; constriction of the airways; rapid pulse and dizziness; and shock.⁷

"It is as serious as, if not more serious than, someone having a stroke or heart attack in church," points out Dr. Jonathan Olson, an allergist and a member of the Church. "A person having an allergic reaction could die more quickly than a person having a heart attack."

Although potential therapies are showing promise, there is currently no cure for food allergies. The standard of care continues to be "avoidance of the allergen and recognizing and treating anaphylaxis," says Dr. Olson.

Food Is Love

Food is often the centerpiece of gatherings. It represents cultures, traditions, and holidays. Food is used to fuel our bodies, but it is also used to nourish our souls, show love and concern, and entice people to gather and connect.

Nowhere is this more true than in the Church. Treats are handed out in classes to encourage attendance or to reinforce a lesson. Ward potlucks, chili cook-offs, and other

"A person having an allergic reaction could die more quickly than a person having a heart attack."

activities give the Saints a reason to congregate and socialize. We make meals for new mothers and for funerals as a heartfelt service. We leave treats on doorsteps to say we are thinking of you.

Even the Savior taught a powerful lesson by feeding the 5,000 who had gathered to hear Him teach.⁸

These examples help illustrate why food allergies can be so challenging to manage and so hard for some to understand, even—and especially—at church. So often food is love. But if ward members view food allergies as an opportunity



to minister, then making accommodations for those with allergies, and even the *lack of food*, can also be an expression of love.

Making the Sacrament Sacred—and Safe

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said: “The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper [is] the sacred, acknowledged focal point of our weekly worship experience. . . .

“ . . . This hour ordained of the Lord is the most sacred hour of our week.”⁹

However, as noted in the Church’s recently

Following these guidelines can ensure a safe sacrament experience for most members.

Members with allergies can discuss with their bishop adaptations that are appropriate for the sacrament. Members

Members with allergies can discuss with leaders safe options for their sacrament bread.



published guidelines on food allergies and cross-contamination training, “Food allergies and reactions to food can have a significant effect on a person’s . . . emotional health and ability to participate in Church meetings and activities.”¹⁰

The Church’s food allergy guidelines include instructions on providing safe sacrament bread as well as how to avoid cross contact on the sacrament table. (Detailed information can be found at disability.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.)

may provide their own allergen-free bread in a sealed plastic bag.

Additionally, families with food allergies face challenges when others bring food or snacks into sacrament meeting. Because some allergic reactions can happen by simply breathing in or touching an allergen, families with food allergies navigate sacrament meeting by switching seats or moving to the foyer when food is present.

In speaking about the sacrament meeting experience in general, President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of

the Twelve Apostles, suggested, “Our primary goal is for everyone to have a spiritual experience and a strengthening faith in our Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ through Sabbath day observance.” He added, “Surely we can expect that cell phones and iPads, games and food can be set aside for one precious hour out of 168 hours in a week for the sacrament meeting that is devoted to Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹¹

For various reasons, not everyone can set aside food during church. But with the shortened schedule, perhaps some can consider President Ballard's suggestion and evaluate if we really need to bring food into sacrament meeting.

Bear One Another's Burdens

While the physical impact of food allergies can be severe, the spiritual impact can be equally profound—for good or bad.

Francesca's daughter has a severe milk allergy. While her daughter was in Primary, one of her teachers loved to bring homemade cupcakes to class for birthdays. Francesca offered to bring safe cupcakes whenever there was a birthday. The teacher declined the offer and instead sent the six-year-old girl to sit in the hallway when birthday treats were shared.

"This was so hurtful on many levels," Francesca recalls. "I wish the teacher would have taken the opportunity to teach the children to 'be like Jesus' and care enough to include everyone."

Inclusion and exclusion are common themes when you speak to families with food allergies. Cynthia's nine-year-old son, who is allergic to peanuts and tree nuts, was anticipating attending a day camp. However, on the morning of the camp, a call came from a leader asking him not to attend. They could not accommodate his allergies.

"I hung up with her and sobbed," Cynthia recalls, "the sorrowful, bottom-of-my-heart tears for my little guy who was excluded again."

Katie Edna Steed, disability specialist manager for the Church, notes: "The Savior would leave the 99 and seek after the one. We need to remember that example—to see the one and be aware of the one."

We Can Help

There is much that members with food allergies and their ward families can do to show love and make church participation safe and inclusive.

What can families with food allergies do?

Families with allergies can explain their needs to leaders and teachers—and communicate again as leaders and teachers change. They can offer to

Questions to Ask When Planning an Activity or Lesson

1. Would including food in my lesson or activity support my message, or could it distract from my message? Could I eliminate food from my lesson or activity?
2. If food is an important part of my activity, how can I minister to those with food allergies? Are there food options that will serve my purpose while being safe for all involved? Could I ask individuals or parents to provide a safe treat or help me identify safe options?
3. If there is no way to provide something that everyone can have, can I provide an alternative for those with allergies? Can I coordinate directly with those with allergies to make a plan with which they feel comfortable?





supply safe food and help plan menus and activities. They can provide simple, life-saving training and emergency plans. They will be understanding when members express fear or

“The Savior would leave the 99 and seek after the one. Remember to see the one and be aware of the one.”

reservations, but they will patiently educate members and work together to find safe and inclusive options. They should ask for reasonable accommodations that the ward can make and sustain.

What can ward members do?

Ward members can seek to understand individual situations. Ward members should defer to parental instruction about giving food to a child. If food is necessary for an activity or lesson, teachers and leaders can ask individuals and parents if the food will be safe. Ward members can invite individuals and parents to participate and problem solve as circumstances require.

Suzanne has several food allergies. She has been particularly touched by the sensitivity of the priests in her ward as they prepare the sacrament. “I am so humbled by the young men who have made it safe for me to take the sacrament,” she says.

One Sunday, the sacrament was not passed to her. The priests preparing it had noticed that her bread had been cross contaminated by the other bread on the table.

“They found me after sacrament meeting, explained what happened, and told me they had received special permission

from the bishop to administer the sacrament to me in a classroom,” Suzanne says. “I cried as they blessed and passed the sacrament in that small room. I could feel the Savior’s love so strongly and His knowledge of how much I had struggled with this challenge.”

“Showing willingness to make a safe environment at church for people with severe allergies is also showing a willingness to bear one another’s burdens,” says Suzanne.

Francesca’s daughter is now in Young Women. Her Young Women president felt



prompted to help this family in their burden. “I felt like we needed to do what it took to make sure she was not forced to choose between her safety and her worship,” she said. “I prayed about how we needed to face this situation and felt firmly that we needed to embrace this family and make sure they were fully included.”

Youth leaders accepted the challenge to plan an overnight youth conference that Francesca’s daughter could safely attend. Francesca helped plan the menu and shop for food.

The young men power washed the griddles before cooking on them.

“It was wonderful!” says Francesca. “I cried and felt God’s love through their kind, inclusive actions. So did my daughter.”



Families, teachers, and leaders can work together to make church a safer place for everyone to learn and grow.

The Works of God Made Manifest

Tanner’s family has felt many miracles, large and small, since losing their son. They hope increased awareness of food allergies is one of them.

“It’s not that these kids with allergies are irresponsible. It’s

not that they aren’t paying attention. But they are kids,” says Tanner’s father, Terry. “It just takes one second of letting your guard down.”

But ministering can help them keep their guard up. “Ministering, by definition, means attending to the needs of others,” says Dr. Olson. “Everything about the Church is based on the needs of the one and making sure their spiritual and physical needs are being met.”

Sharon Eubank, First Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, taught: “Christ tenderly told the Nephites, ‘I have commanded that *none of you* should go away.’ . . .

It is an unwavering requirement of Christian disciples and Latter-day Saints to show true love to one another.”¹²

For Francesca, after a personal struggle to understand why her child faced the challenge of a food allergy, she came to realize, “Sometimes God heals someone with a disability to show forth His glorious works, and sometimes He allows someone to keep their disability because He wants His works to be made manifest in how others treat that person. God gives us all opportunities to learn to be kind and learn to be

like Him by allowing us to be a miracle for someone in their suffering.” ■

NOTES

1. See “Food Allergies: Global Burden, Causes, Treatment, Prevention and Public Policy” (consensus study by the U.S. Institute of Medicine, 2017), National Academies of Science.
2. See Wenyin Loh and Mimi L. K. Tang, “The Epidemiology of Food Allergy in the Global Context,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 15, no. 9 (Sept. 18, 2018), 2043, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6163515.
3. See Alison Joanne Lee, Meera Thalayasingam, and Bee Wah Lee, “Food Allergy in Asia: How Does It Compare?” *Asia Pacific Allergy*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Jan. 2013), 3–14, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3563019/; FARE: Food Allergy Research & Education. “Food Allergy Facts and Statistics for the U.S.,” foodallergy.org/sites/default/files/migrated-files/file/Final-FARE-Food-Allergy-Facts-Statistics.pdf. Some food allergies are outgrown, which accounts for the larger percentage in childhood versus adulthood.
4. See FARE, “Food Allergy Facts and Statistics for the U.S.”
5. See Loh and Tang, “The Epidemiology of Food Allergy in the Global Context.”
6. See “Signs and Symptoms,” anaphylaxis.org.uk/hcp/what-is-anaphylaxis/signs-and-symptoms.
7. See Mayo Clinic, “Food allergy,” mayoclinic.org.
8. See Mark 6:37–44; Luke 9:10–17.
9. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Behold the Lamb of God,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2019, 45, 46.
10. “Food Allergies,” in the Policies and Guidelines section of disability. ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
11. M. Russell Ballard, in “April 2015: Sabbath Day Observance” (video), ChurchofJesusChrist.org/media-library.
12. Sharon Eubank, “Christ: The Light That Shines in Darkness,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2019, 74; emphasis added.

How Can I Learn More?

Visit disability.ChurchofJesusChrist.org and select “Policies and Guidelines” to learn more about making church a safer place for those with food allergies, including how to reduce the chances for allergic reactions, how to recognize them, and how to respond.