Allergy Shmallergy: 4th Grade Food Allergy Lesson Plan

This lesson plan is one that I recently presented to a fourth grade class. The discussion and expected responses can easily be tailored up to a fifth or sixth grade level. It should incorporate some lecture and leave room for as much discussion as possible. I am careful NOT to speak to or about my own son or any other child in the class with food allergies. But I have found that they typically choose to jump in at some point during the presentation, making the conversation much richer and more interesting.

Materials:
• 1 set of EpiPens
• 1 or more EpiPen trainers
• Several food containers with surprising ingredients or manufacturing statements (examples of some I brought: Trader Joe’s chicken broth, Rice Krispie treats, Pedialyte drink, and Joy’s Sugar Cones…)
• Printout of a restaurant allergen menu (I used McDonald’s for familiarity/relatability)

Optional:
  o 1 Auvi-Q
  o 1 or more Auvi-Q trainers
  o allergy-free snack for the class

I. Introduction
I usually begin by asking the kids, "How many of you know someone with a food allergy?" Be prepared for the kids to list everyone that they’ve ever known who is allergic to everything from the squid to sunshine.

A. What is an allergy?
Your body is protected by something called an immune system. Your immune system is like an army that’s ready to fight against invaders (like germs, viruses, and bacteria) that could make you sick. When it senses an invader, the immune system attacks it by releasing histamines and
chemicals that affect your eyes, nose, mouth, tongue, skin, and lungs. But sometimes, it mistakes something harmless (like food or pollen) for an invader and overreacts, releasing way too much histamine and chemicals to attack it. This causes an allergic reaction.

**B. What kinds of foods can you be allergic to?**
Almost anything. *This a great time to get the kids involved again.* Although you can be allergic to almost anything, 8 foods account for 90% of food allergy reactions.

Ask the kids to guess which foods people are most commonly allergic to.

Answer:
- Dairy
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Tree Nuts
- Fish
- Shellfish
- Soy
- Wheat.

"What does 'dairy' mean? What foods contain dairy?" "What about wheat?" "Soy?"

**C. Who can get an allergy?**
Anyone can get an allergy to anything at any time. You can be born with an allergy or you can develop one at a later time.

*How do you know if someone has a food allergy? Can you tell by looking at them?*

**II. Food Allergy Reactions**
Food allergy reactions can affect a number of different systems in the body and can range from mild to severe (or serious). A potentially dangerous condition that can occur is called **anaphylaxis**.

**A. Symptoms**
When someone comes in contact with the food they’re allergic to, their body can react in a number of different ways. Some of these symptoms are:
- Itchy rash (called hives), eczema;
- Swollen lips, tongue, throat;
- Itchy mouth, throat, or ears;
• Trouble swallowing;
• Redness around the eyes;
• Coughing, wheezing, and/or trouble breathing;
• Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea;
• Stomach pain;
• Sneezing, coughing or runny nose;
• Turning blue;
• Feeling faint or passing out.

B. What to Do if You/Your Friend is Having an Allergic Reaction

Pose the question to the kids and see how many correct answers you can extract, “What would you do if you saw a friend having one of the symptoms I just mentioned?”

In a perfect world, here is what you should do in the order you should do it:

1. **Call an adult for help or send someone to find an adult.** Which adult? Any adult! A school nurse, teacher, parent, lifeguard, coach, etc can judge what’s going on and assist.

2. If no adult is present, call 911.

2. Next, an adult will immediately give that person medicine: Benadryl and/or an epinephrine shot.

3. If epinephrine was given, someone needs to call 911 right away. Do not drive to the hospital yourself once an ambulance has been called. Occasionally, the person experiencing the reaction will need an extra dose of epinephrine or other medication that EMTs can administer.

III. Treatment for food allergies

A. Food Avoidance

The only way for people with food allergies can be sure they won’t have a reaction is to avoid eating their allergen (the food they are allergic to) as well as any meals that contain that allergen. So, if you were allergic to peanuts, you would need to avoid peanuts, peanut butter, meals/sauces/desserts with peanut or peanut butter in them, candy like Reese’s Pieces and anything made on equipment with peanuts.
What if you were allergic to dairy?

**B. Epinephrine Autoinjectors**

I bring in two real EpiPens and a trainer as well as an Auvi-Q trainer. **DO NOT LET THE KIDS TOUCH/HOLD LIVE EPINEPHRINE AUTOINJECTORS.**

I explain that in an emergency, an adult will use one of these devices to inject a medicine that will help someone who is having a severe allergic reaction.

I hold up the live EpiPens and a live Auvi-Q and explain to the kids that they are the same medicine, delivered in two similar ways (via a shot). You will need to underscore that these live versions contain a sharp needle that could hurt them. If they see one of these real autoinjectors in a friend’s backpack or elsewhere, they should NOT touch them.

With each trainer, demonstrate how to administer a shot of epinephrine. Pass around trainers.

**IV. Daily Life with Food Allergies**

Most people with severe food allergies need to carry two epinephrine autoinjectors (like EpiPens or Auvi-Q) everywhere they go. That means when they’re at school, when they go skiing, to the pool, and on playdates. In addition, people with food allergies need to be pay close attention to what they eat all day, everyday. That means reading labels and asking questions.

**A. School**

Kids with food allergies should not eat food that is not okayed by an adult familiar with their allergy.

Can a kid with a dairy allergy eat hot lunch?
A birthday cupcake?

Kids with food allergies need to be careful, therefore they sometimes wait until they get home to enjoy a treat or bring their own special SAFE snacks.

Do kids with food allergies WANT to join in the group treat? Probably. But if it’s not safe, it’s not worth risking a possible trip to the hospital.

What’s important isn’t the food, is that everyone be included in on the fun!
**B. Playdates**

Your friend is so excited to come to your house to hang after school. But what if your friend has food allergies?

*Aside from filling out a bus form, what else do kids with food allergies need to do to prepare?*

It’s a good idea for kids with food allergies to ask their parents to speak with their friend’s parents before the playdate to talk about food allergies and emergency medicines. Your friend may bring a special, safe snack to your house so they feel comfortable. They will also bring their EpiPens or other emergency medication.

*If you see EpiPens or medicine in your friend’s backpack, should you touch it or play with it?*

No. Autoinjectors contain needles that could hurt you and you should never take any medication without an adult’s permission.

*If you *think* a snack is safe for your friend and your friend *thinks* that it’s safe, is it safe? Should you eat it together?*

No. *Always*, ask an adult to read the ingredients list first. It’s better to be sure something is safe. And, if you all still have questions, you can always call your friend’s parents for help!

**C. Buying Food**

If you have food allergies, buying food is tricky. Sometimes what seems like a simple food ends up being unsafe for people with food allergies.

*Involve the kids:*
*Ask them, “What do you think goes into __(name a food)__?”*

*Pass around grocery containers and have the kids determine whether someone with one of the top 8 allergies could safely eat each item. Discuss as a group.*

**D. Restaurants and Travel**

Restaurants, airports and rest stops are a few of the many places people with food allergies have to be extra careful. Not only can an ingredient cause an allergic reaction, but so can something like a knife or a cutting board that has touched his/her allergen. You might notice that people with food allergies ask questions before they can order safely. It’s very hard to sit down and look at a menu and just order.
Pass around restaurant allergen menus and have the kids spot their favorite dish. Is that safe for someone with a top 8 allergy?

V. Conclusion
Kids with food allergies are the same as everyone else; they just need to be more careful about what they eat so they don't get sick.

How can you help your friends/classmates with food allergies?

What was one of the most important/interesting facts you learned today?