

## New to Food Allergy? Some Thoughts on Getting Started

By Lois King, Ottawa Ontario Activator  
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We recognize that when a family member is diagnosed with one or more severe or life-threatening allergies, there are implications for the whole family. Learning to deal with Epi-pens® and emergency plans, while vital, is only the beginning. Reorganizing the kitchen, figuring out new menus, and learning new ways of cooking and baking take much more time and lots of creativity. It can't all be done in a week or even a month. It is extremely difficult to give up the convenience foods we are used to and the spontaneity that they allow. Old favourites may also have to be given up. It is important to acknowledge this reality and look for ways to minimize the extra work that meal planning and preparation now entail.

The suggestions in the following paragraphs are the result of one family's fifteen years of avoidance of peanut, milk and eggs. There are undoubtedly many other useful strategies for allergic families – perhaps some readers will share theirs. These ideas are passed on in the hope that they will make those first few months a little easier.

### **Sanity Preservation and the Fast Food Alternatives**

Severe or life-threatening food allergies restrict not only the food we eat, but the way we live our lives. When the primary cook and shopper (Mom) is REALLY busy in other areas of her life, or if she is ill, the practices used by other families to deal with such a situation are not available to us. We don't order take-out; restaurant eating is very limited and, frankly, somewhat stressful; the frozen dinners in the supermarket usually have one ingredient (egg or especially cheese) which put them off limits.

A good way to handle this reality is to be **BE PREPARED** and **DO SOME RESEARCH** now. There are lots of commercial products which can be used for homemade 'semi-fast food' dishes. On a day when you have extra time and energy, make a point of checking out shelves of your supermarket you don't usually visit.

Here are some possibilities:

- individual and family size pizza bases, canned pizza sauce, pepperoni sticks or slices (these freeze well), deli meats (e.g., shaved ham), sliced mushrooms, pineapple bits, grated cheese (optional – yes, cheeseless pizza)
- pita breads, tortilla wraps, English muffins, taco shells – fill with home-cooked or deli meats, canned chicken, tuna or salmon, salad ingredients, tofu, canned white beans, relishes
- *some* "Shake and Bake" flavours and other commercial breadings can be used with cut-up boneless chicken or pork to make "nuggets". Be sure to double-check the ingredients.
- Cheap, dry pasta is usually egg-free (be sure to check!); many bottled sauces are OK, extra vegetables or ground meat can be added

One advantage of these “semi-fast” ideas is that they can be individually tailored for family members, so children will usually eat the meal. In addition, you can keep most of the ingredients in your pantry or freezer, adding whatever fresh vegetables may be on hand.

### **You and Your Freezer**

Your freezer can also be a comfort and a life-saver. Occasionally you will come across a commercial product (other than juices and vegetables) which you can use. Mostly, though, it will be full of “plan-overs”. It is almost as easy to make two eggless meat loaves as one, so bake them both, then wrap and freeze the second one. Similarly, many homemade soups and stews freeze very well and can form the basis of lunch or dinner. Freezers are wonderful for emergency supplies of allergen-free cookies and cupcakes to take to birthday parties or short-notice school events. When baking, try to squirrel away at least a small portion of your output for that rainy day.

### **Shopping for Food**

Try not to bring the children, at least at first. Ingredient reading is time-consuming and tedious – the last thing you need is an impatient child nagging you. Bring a magnifying glass if you’re wearing bifocal lenses (seriously!).

### **Presentation**

Especially for children’s party or holiday foods, the decoration can be more important than the food itself. A lot can be done with a slightly flat birthday cake! Invest in some food colouring and any suitable decorating goodies, cookie cutters, or special equipment.

### **Looking on the Bright Side**

Your family food expense may very well be smaller now that you are using fewer convenience foods and eating out less often. This means you should purchase *without guilt* those convenient items which DO meet your requirements.

Your family’s diet is likely to be healthier since you are paying attention to it and eating fewer store-bought treats.

You have a good line, should you care to use it, for refusing to bake for the never-ending fundraisers: “It’s so long since I baked anything using regular ingredients, I’ve forgotten how! Let me give you \$5 instead.”

For more information and/or to support us through membership:  
Allergy/Asthma Information Association (AAIA)  
Box 100, Toronto, Ontario Canada M9W 5K9  
Phone (416) 679-9521 or 1-800-611-7011  
Web Site: [www.aaia.ca](http://www.aaia.ca) Email: [national@aaia.ca](mailto:national@aaia.ca)