

Museums and Food Allergies

by Sarah and Susan Uthoff

Food and museums go together like peanut butter and jelly. Food attracts people to events and lets them taste or feel history. However, many people have food intolerances or a food allergy. According to the Food Allergy Research & Education Organization, 15 million Americans have food allergies. That translates to one in every 13 children. A study in 2013 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that food allergies among children have increased by almost 50% between 1997 and 2011. Major changes have been made in how schools operate to deal with the increased incidents of allergies. For instance, the childhood perennial peanut butter is now banned in many schools (or peanut-free tables are provided), and milk is no longer mandatory. How museums operate will also have to change and adapt.

Food Allergies and Food Sensitivities

Although they are often confused or mislabeled, there is a difference between a food allergy and a food sensitivity. Food sensitivities involve the digestive system. The American Academy of Allergy defines food intolerance or food sensitivity as difficulty in digesting a particular food. This can lead to symptoms such as intestinal gas, abdominal pain or diarrhea.

Food allergies involve the immune system and can cause severe and life-threatening reactions. A food allergic reaction occurs when the body's immune system reacts to a foreign protein found in food and the reactions are severe. If you have a food allergy, after eating a particular food, you begin to have all or some of the following symptoms: diarrhea, stomach cramps, tingling sensation in the mouth, swelling of the tongue and throat, gasping for breath, loss of consciousness, scratching a sudden outbreak of hives or vomiting. A severe reaction, called anaphylaxis,

may result in death. According to The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, food allergies are the leading cause of anaphylaxis outside the hospital setting in the U.S. Further, a recent analysis of data from U.S. hospital emergency departments (ED) estimates a total of 20,821 hospital ED visits, 2,333 visits for anaphylaxis, and 520 hospitalizations caused by food allergy occurred in a two-month period.

Foods to Watch For

Depending on the person, allergic reactions may occur immediately after consumption or several hours later. The same food can cause different symptoms in people. The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology lists six foods that account for 90% of all food-allergic reactions in the U.S. Museums need to be aware of these allergens in their foods, crafts and collections:

- milk
- eggs
- peanuts, tree nuts (i.e., walnuts, almonds, cashews, pistachios, and pecans)
- wheat
- soy
- fish and shellfish

Avoidance and Treatment

Both raw and cooked foods can cause allergic reactions. Unlike with some foodborne illnesses, cooking a food does not prevent it from causing an allergic reaction. There is no way to know how serious a reaction will be. Early administration of epinephrine (adrenaline) is crucial to successfully treating anaphylactic reactions. Epinephrine is available by prescription in a self-injectable device (EpiPen® or

Twinject®). Your staff should know how to use these.

To avoid an allergic reaction, people need to know what is in a food item. The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 (FALCPA) deals only with intentionally-added ingredients in packaged goods. This includes flavors and processing aids. It does not deal with cross-contamination issues, so you will see precautionary label statements (e.g., “may contain”; “produced in a factory”). There are no threshold levels with allergens, so any minute amount is labeled. The only exception to this is highly refined oil. In other words, highly refined peanut oil is NOT an allergen.

Concession stands, restaurants and those preparing demonstration recipes should be aware of foods that may cause an allergic reaction. People allergic to a food need to avoid foods that trigger reactions. If you work with a food that will produce an allergic reaction, you must follow good personal hygiene practices. Minute traces of allergenic foods can be transferred from clothes or hands to another food. Cross-contamination in food service from other foods can cause an accidental exposure. Accidental exposure usually occurs from poorly-cleaned utensils, misreading recipes, “special recipe additions” or poorly-cleaned cooking environments. The incident rates are high enough that you can no longer assume all people can handle or eat all kinds of food.

Read food labels to make sure foods you are serving are not allergens. Label foods so the public knows what your concession foods contain. There should be someone at the concession who can answer questions about the ingredients in the foods sold at the stand. If staff is unsure about an ingredient, say “I don’t know!”

Here is an example of how complicated this problem can be. People who are allergic to milk should avoid the following foods and ingredients:

- Artificial butter flavor, butter, butter fat, butter oil, buttermilk
- Casein, caseinates, rennet casein
- Cheese, cream, cottage cheese, curds, whey

- Custard, pudding, yogurt
- Half & half
- All forms of milk: condensed, dry evaporated, milk from goats or other animals, low-fat, malted, milk fat, non-fat, powder, protein, skimmed, solids and wholes
- Sour cream, sour cream solids, sour milk solids

Allergies can be so severe that they go beyond food we ingest. Some people are so sensitive that they cannot even touch the food they are allergic to. That means we need to be aware of allergies when there is a craft project. A child with celiac disease may be able to participate if she wears gloves (food service type is fine). Unfortunately, museums don’t always provide these, so some children are left out of the activity. Remember that many art supplies contain gluten, including paint and markers, play dough, artificial clay and paper mache.

The only way to avoid an allergic food reaction is to avoid the food. You can get more information on this topic from:

- The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network www.foodallergy.org
- American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology www.aaaai.org/patients/resources
- Iowa State University Extension www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/content/food-allergens (This site also includes posters that you can print and post at your site.)

What Your Museum Can Do

As a museum, be aware that some of your visitors are dealing with food allergies. Have a plan of action:

1. Make sure your staff is aware of possible allergens.
2. Train your staff on what to do if someone has a reaction.
3. Ask teachers if any child with allergies will be part of the field trip.

4. Consider having non-period alternative ingredients for hands-on projects, like gluten-free flour.
5. Have plastic gloves available for hands-on activities.

Food intolerances and food allergies don't mean that food and food products can't be part of the learning experience or the fun. However, museums must be aware and help visitors take care. ☚

About the Authors

Sarah S. Uthoff is a respected authority on Laura Ingalls Wilder. That led her to living history and historic foodways. Uthoff was a historical interpreter at Ushers Ferry Historic Village in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for eight years and serves as MOMCC Foodways Resource Group Chair. Uthoff's

ongoing historic foodways projects are researching one-room school lunches and the ALHFAM Food Safety Manual. Professionally, she's a reference librarian at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and director of the Oxford (Iowa) Public Library. Uthoff hosts a podcast on historic literature and related topics, including food history. Look for her all over the web under Trundlebed Tales.

Susan Uthoff was an Iowa State University Extension Specialist for 40 years and was a certified ServSafe instructor. Now retired, she helped provide food safety information for ALHFAM's recently-adopted "Food Safety Manual" that can be found at <http://www.alhfam.org/resources/Documents/PIGS/Food/ALHFAM%20Food%20Safety%20Manual-2-16.pdf>. She's so happy to finally have her entire 2,500 plus cookbook collection in one place for the first time in her daughter's research building.



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