

Balancing Summer Camps and Food Allergies

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“CAN I GO TO SLEEPAWAY CAMP? Those words can make most parents of a child with food allergies cringe. Managing a child’s food allergies on a day-to-day basis can be a full-time job. In some cases, one mistake can result in a trip to the emergency room. The thought of sending a child to an unknown place to live in a cabin and have every meal prepared in a cafeteria-style environment can seem, at first, out of the question.

However, summer camp is an experience that all children can enjoy regardless of their allergies. Camp offers children an opportunity to build confidence in themselves in their ability to assume responsibility for avoiding certain foods. As with other aspects of managing allergies, anything is possible—if you plan ahead.

PLANNING AHEAD

- Choose a camp with a low student-to-camp counselor ratio so your child will be assured of immediate attention, if needed.
- Visit the camp during the open house session most camps hold during the spring. Ask lots of questions! Quiz the parents of children who have attended the camp. They may be able to give you insight into camp life that can help you plan ahead.
- Select a day camp the first year so you only have to work around one meal a day.
- Include your child’s picture with the camp registration form and **boldly** highlight the medical information.
- Explain your child’s food allergies and medication needs to the camp director, cook, and cabin leader before your child arrives at camp. Have them practice using the EpiPen trainer, if prescribed.
- Provide clear instructions about what you expect the camp staff to do if an emergency occurs. Find out how far the hospital is. Does the camp have a phone? Who usually administers medications?
- Review all menus **carefully** with the chef. Be sure your child participates in these discussions. Ask very specific questions. The mother of a 13-year-old boy who is allergic to wheat and tree nuts wrote, “My husband, John, was assured by the coordinators of a 7-day Boy Scout canoe trip to the Boundary Waters of Canada that our son would be able to eat the provided meals. Luckily, John asked for copies of the actual labels of the freeze-dried meals. Our son could not have any of the seven trail mixes and only one of the seven dinners. A trip to a few camping stores yielded alternative dinners and snacks.”
- Choose a camp you can drive to within a short time. One mother brings a week’s supply of muffins, breads, and cookies to her daughter’s music camp every Sunday. Her daughter checks with the cook about ingredients for each meal. The cook serves the girl’s meal before adding any sauces.

In many cases, minor food substitutions are all that is needed to allow the camper to participate with others. For example, rice can be substituted for pasta and topped with spaghetti sauce. Gravy can be thickened with cornstarch instead of flour.

CONCLUSION

When your child asks, "Can I go to summer camp?" think of the good that can come from the experience, not to mention the memories that last a lifetime. One camper's mother sums it up nicely, "It is a very stressful time for me when my daughter is away at camp. But I've realized that she has to live her life as a normal child in spite of her life-threatening food allergies. I have to allow her to blossom."

The key to success is to be flexible, ask many questions, and plan ahead. Finally, do not forget that there is nothing wrong with picking your child up midweek if things are not going well.

For more information about The Food Allergy Network or to receive a sample copy of *Food Allergy News* and free brochures for your patients, write to The Food Allergy Network RS, 4744 Holly Avenue, Fairfax, VA 22030-5467, or call 1-(800)-929-4040.

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