

# Parents unite to protect children from food allergies

## Nuts, other fare can lead to anaphylaxis, death

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Christopher Cheung licked the blue cotton candy off his fingers and did his best to sing along with the crowd . . . “buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack” . . . at the seventh-inning stretch of yesterday's Padres game.

But in the surrounding crowd, there were no peanuts in sight. The Padres agreed to seat peanut-allergic children in a special section for one game this season as an experiment, Petco Park general manager Richard Andersen said. The Minnesota Twins tried it last year and expanded to it one game a month this season.

After being contacted by a local parents group – the Alliance for Nut-Allergic Children – the Padres worked out the logistics with everyone from ushers to concessionaires to make most of Section 326 off limits to nuts.

“We've added two extra guest-service representatives and there's an EMT assigned to that area,” Andersen said. “Our top priority is safety.”

That made the game a much better experience for Christopher than the last time he was at the ballpark.

“My husband took him to a ballgame last summer, and the people next to them were eating peanuts,” said Dr. Sherry Huang of Scripps Ranch, Christopher's mother.



SEAN M. HAFNEY / Union-Tribune  
Dr. Sherry Huang and her son Christopher Cheung enjoyed yesterday's Padres game from a peanut-free zone at Petco Park. Christopher is allergic to peanuts.

## FOOD ALLERGY: BY THE NUMBERS

**12 million:** The number of Americans with food allergy.

**1 in 25:** U.S. children under 18 with food allergy.

**1 in 17:** Children under 3 with food allergy.

**8:** The number of foods – milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish and shellfish – that account

When Kye Cheung explained his 8-year-old son's allergy to the other fans, they agreed not to eat the nuts. When father and son returned to their seats after buying souvenirs, the couple had departed but peanut shells were left behind.

Christopher had a severe asthmatic reaction from the shells that lasted more than a week, said Huang, a pediatric gastroenterologist and professor of pediatrics at University of California San Diego School of Medicine. Yesterday, Huang and her son were among 303 ticket holders in the peanut-free zone, marked by red signs.

"To be able to go to this game, to feel normal, is incredible for them," Huang said of the dozens of children at the game.

Peanuts aren't something these children can snack on as one inning leads to another. They can react with anything from a rash and hives to anaphylaxis, a potentially life-threatening reaction that can cause breathing problems, loss of consciousness and, without immediate treatment, death.

"Each year, thousands of people rush to hospital emergency rooms with unexpected anaphylaxis from food allergens, and, unfortunately, 100 to 200 are fatalities. Of those, about half are thought to be caused by peanuts," said Dr. Michael E. Ruff, a board-certified allergist in Dallas and member of the public education committee of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.

Peanut allergy is the leading cause of fatal and near-fatal food-induced anaphylaxis, especially in children and adolescents, Ruff said.

That's no secret to Jodi Granieri, a Scripps Ranch mother who was among the parents who approached the Padres. Granieri co-founded the alliance in March.

"We were a handful of parents at one school who all had kids with nut allergies, and we wanted to band together because of our kids," Granieri said.

Their group represents the increasing advocacy by families of the growing number of children with food allergies.

"I used to see one kid a month with allergies to peanuts or tree nuts, milk or eggs, the most common food allergies. Now I'm seeing one or two kids a week," said Dr. Michael Welch, a clinical professor in the pediatrics department at UCSD and co-director of the Allergy & Asthma Medical Group & Research Center.

According to a study in the December 2003 *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, reported peanut allergy in children doubled between 1997 and 2002.

for 90 percent of all food-caused allergic reactions. U.S. law requires that products containing protein derived from any of these ingredients be clearly identified on food labels.

**30,000:** U.S. emergency room visits each year caused by allergic reactions to food.

**150 to 200:** Annual U.S. deaths from anaphylaxis because of food allergy.

*SOURCE: The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network*



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune  
Peanut-allergic children and their families and friends watched yesterday's Padres game from a peanut-free zone at Petco Park. The Padres lost their third straight contest to the Mariners, 4-3.

The reasons behind the increase are unclear. Among the theories: peanuts are more potent when roasted; children eat peanuts when their immune systems are immature; and American children's immune systems are so protected they are not as resistant to challenges.

Although food allergy is a controllable problem, Welch said, for those allergic to peanuts, tree nuts, eggs and shellfish, the threat will be lifelong. And just because a child has not experienced anaphylactic shock doesn't mean he or she won't.

"The first reaction can be hives, and the second can be the big one," Welch said.

Granieri clearly remembers the day she learned of her 5-year-old son Drew's food allergy. She was making her favorite pasta dish, which calls for toasted walnuts. She asked Drew, then 3, if he wanted to try one.

"I watched him as he chewed it," she said. "He got a funny look on his face, spit out the nut, got out of his chair, coughing, and ran into the bathroom throwing up. His eyes were watery, he was rolling on the ground, started getting hives all over his neck and face.

"I asked him, 'Can you breathe?' and my husband said we should call 911. I told him we'd do it from the car."

As they headed south on Interstate 15, emergency medical personnel had an ambulance meet them on the side of the freeway.

"They gave him a shot of epinephrine and took him straight to the hospital," Granieri said. "It was awful."

Drew's reaction was the most serious – anaphylactic shock in a matter of minutes. The family went home with a prescription for steroids and EpiPens, auto-injectors for administering epinephrine shots. Tests later revealed that Drew is allergic not only to walnuts but also pecans, macadamias and hazelnuts.

"Your whole family changes," Granieri said. "My favorite pasta, dessert and salad all have nuts. I love nuts. But you can't keep nuts in the house. You have to read every label, ask every restaurant what's in the food. We end up going to the same places over and over, and he orders the same thing over and over."

You even have to watch what airline you fly. Peanuts once were common fare on flights, but several airlines – American, United, Northwest, JetBlue, Spirit, AirTran, US Airways, America West and ATA – don't serve them anymore. Others may not serve peanuts if you request it, according to the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, a Fairfax, Va.-based advocacy group.

Carol D'Agnese, a Rancho Peñasquitos mother, is familiar with the drill. As a new mother five years ago, D'Agnese saw the lips of her 11-month-old son, Luke, swell after he ate American cheese.

"Food allergies were not on my radar," she said.

## TO LEARN MORE ABOUT FOOD ALLERGY

[sandiegofoodallergy.org](http://sandiegofoodallergy.org)

Local group of parents with food-allergic children sponsors meetings and seminars. Affiliated with the nonprofit Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America. Web site has a message forum.

[foodallergy.org](http://foodallergy.org)

Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network site answers FAQs; has legal news, recipes and allergy alerts.

**"Understanding and Managing Your Child's Food Allergies,"**  
Scott H. Sicherer (2006).

**"The Whole Foods Allergy Cookbook,"** Cybele Pascal (2005).

*RESEARCH: Beth Wood, Union-Tribune*

But she knew enough to give him Benadryl and then rushed him to the hospital.

Luke, it turns out, is allergic to eggs, milk, soy, peanuts and tree nuts.

“When my son was diagnosed, it was like a sock in the stomach,” D’Agnese said. “I said, ‘OK, so is there a support group or something?’ My doctor and his very intelligent nurse both looked at me sweetly and said, ‘I’m sorry, no, there’s not.’ And I decided, well, I’m gonna start one.”

Fast forward to last summer when she heard that the Anaphylaxis Network was going to host a fundraising and awareness walk. D’Agnese contacted a couple of other parents, created an e-mail address and a flier announcing the start of the San Diego Food Allergy Support Group and distributed the information at the walk.

She heard from 35 to 40 families, and the first official meeting was in November.

“The mood in the room was that everyone’s in the same boat and we all want to know how to deal with it,” D’Agnese said. “The world is not going to change. It’s up to parents and children to change the way they approach things.”

Indeed, not everyone is sympathetic.

“Put the kids in a plastic bubble and put them in the stands. Problem solved!” wrote a blogger named “Striff” on a SignOnSanDiego.com forum in response to *The San Diego Union-Tribune’s* May 18 story on the nut-free zone at yesterday’s game.

“Will they censor the line in ‘Take Me Out to the Ballgame’ too?? This is ridiculous, peanuts are a part of the game. I’m allergic to dirt, they should replace the infield with sand to accommodate ME and the seven other people in San Diego allergic to dirt,” “Padre Ninja” wrote.

David Swanson, an Encino psychologist who works with families dealing with food allergies and has a child with a food allergy, said those who don’t understand parents’ caution need only think back to the first time their child swallowed water while swimming and appeared to be choking.

Swanson also cautions that if parents of allergic children are having a difficult time coping, they may want to seek help.

“A parent who’s made sure teachers are educated and has an injector at school should feel less anxious,” he said. “And when they don’t, that says something else is going on. . . . In a crisis situation, anxiety works well, but on a daily basis, it works against them to worry needlessly. And socially, it can potentially push people away.”

Swanson said the keys are communication and education, so that parents of allergic children can feel they are going to be safe and others can understand the inherent danger to these children.

“One of the things we are advocating for is safeguards for our kids in schools,” Granieri said of the Alliance for Nut-Allergic Children, which approached the San Diego Unified School District last summer.

“We are not advocating a nut-free school. We are not radicals. We’re looking for nut-safe, not nut-free,” she said.

The district removed nuts from elementary school cafeterias and formed a task force to study how schools would handle the food allergy issue. Three weeks ago, the school board approved the

district's new policy and procedures for dealing with life-threatening health conditions, such as food allergies.

“You don't have a lot of time,” Granieri said. “Everybody needs to be trained to use EpiPens, we want teachers to be trained to use them and have medications readily available.”

Next year, her son will be in kindergarten.

“He's a little impulsive boy,” his mother said. “If next year, you bring your chocolate chip cookies with walnuts in for a snack, he's going to grab one and eat it. He knows he has an allergy but he forgets. His impulsive nature could be his downfall.

“If you've never seen this, and how fast it can come on, I think a lot of people don't understand. I didn't understand until it happened to us.”