



*International MOMS Club®
Fact Sheet*

Allergy Awareness

What are allergies?

Allergies are a person's body response to an irritant or substance (called an "allergen") that the body thinks is a danger. Because the body thinks that the allergen is a danger, the body tries to "fight it off" by mobilizing the body's immune system. Sometimes, the body goes into overdrive in trying to fight the allergen, and the immune system can end up damaging the person's body, instead of protecting it.

An allergen can be pollen in the air, insect stings or bites, cat or dog dander, a specific food (like peanuts) or just about anything, if a person is sensitive to that particular thing. Some people are very sensitive to smells and their bodies have an allergic-type reaction to strong smells, even if the smell is normally considered pleasant, like perfume.

A person whose body is responding to an allergy may experience any of a wide variety of symptoms, including sneezing, watery eyes, runny nose, rash, itchiness, breathing difficulties and even heart problems. A mild allergy may be barely noticeable, but a severe allergy can be life-threatening.

Should we ban allergens from our meetings?

With the increase in publicity about allergies, especially life-threatening allergies in children, some chapters have considered starting "Allergy Policies," such as making their chapters "Peanut Free."

If your chapter has members or members' children with serious allergies, your chapter may vote to restrict those allergens from being brought to meetings. However, there are several things your chapter must realize when creating any policy.

First, don't make promises that you cannot keep. For example, while your chapter may vote to strive to be peanut-free, it should not promise to be peanut-free.

Being peanut-free may be the goal of your chapter, but there can be legal and health problems if you promise that your chapter is peanut-free, because that is an impossible promise to keep.

Why? Let us explain...

Most MOMS Club chapter activities – your monthly business meetings, park days, field trips, etc. – are held in public places. Churches, parks, libraries – no matter where your meeting place is, it is open to people and circumstances beyond your control.

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Because of that, even if your chapter has the best intentions, there is no way to ensure that any public place is truly allergen-free.

For example, say your chapter votes to be peanut-free and your members are perfect at not bringing peanuts to your meeting... Peanuts could still find their way into your meeting room:

- Peanuts might have been eaten in the room on another day, by another group;
- A member's child may have eaten peanut butter at home, and had a spot of it on her clothing or skin;
- A member could bring a snack to the meeting, thinking that it was peanut-free, but not realizing that peanuts or peanut oil were an ingredient.
- A visiting mom may bring peanuts or a peanut product into the room without the chapter's knowledge. She may not see a sign posted by the chapter, or she may not realize the product has peanuts in it;
- A visitor or member might bring a toy from home that has been touched by a child who had peanut butter on his/her hands;
- Or, toys provided by the meeting location may have been touched by a child with peanut butter on his/her hands when another group used the room days before your event.

None of those situations would be intentional, but for someone who is extremely sensitive to peanuts, any of those situations could lead to a life-threatening emergency.

Since there is no way to truly ensure that the space is not contaminated, either before or during the event, if you claim to have a peanut-free meeting or activity, and a mother brings a very peanut-sensitive child to your event, it could be putting her child's health in jeopardy and your chapter could be held liable.

So, you can see, no meetings, park days, playgroups in regular homes, field trips or other activities can be declared truly allergen-free because it's impossible to guarantee that and someone could die if they trusted your guarantee.



So, what can you do?

Although your chapter cannot promise to be allergen-free, if members in your chapter are concerned about allergies, your chapter can vote to make a standing rule that no one should bring that particular allergen to meetings or activities. If a chapter votes to avoid a particular allergen, and a member continues to bring it to meetings or activities, the member can be asked to leave the chapter, if that consequence is part of the standing rule.

However, it should be remembered that a chapter is not required to have an allergy policy. If the issue has not come up in your chapter, or if the chapter discusses the idea and votes to not have an allergy policy, that is allowed.

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Even if your chapter does not vote to avoid a particular allergen, there are still things it can do to help if there are member families with allergy concerns:

- 1) You can include their name and allergy in an “Allergy Alert” section of your newsletter or note the allergies next to the family’s entry in your roster – only do either of these if you have the mother’s permission first! Having an Allergy Alert or allergy entry in the roster can help make the membership more aware and vigilant regarding allergies whenever that child is present;
- 2) When bringing snacks or drinks to any event, your members can also bring the original packaging or the recipe they used to make it. That way, anyone can check the ingredients if there is concern;
- 3) Members should be made aware that they are each responsible for the safety and well-being of their own children at all times. This is a part of the chapter Bylaws, but when a mother is with a group of friends, sometimes she will presume that “someone” else is watching her child.

Especially when a child has life-threatening allergies, a mother must be vigilant about her child’s exposure, even if she knows the other mothers are helping her. If a mother is ever in doubt or concerned about her child’s safety, she should remove her child from the area or not allow her child to eat the snack. She should never presume that someone else will notice and keep her child from eating the snack;

- 4) The chapter should make all members and visitors aware that – even if their goal is to be allergen-free – no one should ever assume a location is truly allergen-free;
- 5) Encourage your members to be vigilant in making sure their children do not share food with other children at the activities. We want all our children to learn to share, but they should not share food, unsupervised, at this age;
- 6) If a playgroup has a child or member with an allergy, the playgroup members can choose to make their gatherings as allergen-free as is realistically possible. However, even if all members of the group have a child with the same allergy, there is no way for the chapter to guarantee that all the homes will be entirely purged of the allergen. Therefore, caution should still be exercised;
- 7) If a playgroup has some members with allergies, and some members that know their homes are not allergen-free, the chapter can help them start two playgroups for the same age children – one group for the children with allergies and another group for the children whose homes are not allergen free.

What if we don’t all agree?

If there is a strong difference of opinion in the chapter concerning the avoidance of a particular allergen, a chapter may sister into two chapters – one whose members agree to try to not bring that substance to any chapter activities and one that does not have that prohibition. Should this situation come up in your chapter – where members cannot agree and wish to sister because of it – please contact your Coordinator so she can work with you on the sistering and any other issues your chapter may have.



Remember, your Coordinator is there to help you and your chapter!