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Food Allergy Freedom

By Elizabeth Muller

We just celebrated the 1-year anniversary of "Food Allergy Freedom" for my two kids. To my surprise, I almost missed it. It has been easy to slip into a normal life, where we don't need to worry about possible sudden onset of severe anaphylaxis. It's easy to forget the constant stress and vigilance that was once a constant in our lives. I have started taking normal life for granted.

My husband and I have been through it all, Epi Pens, ambulance rides to the ER, dreaded calls from the kids' schools, and even the inability to attend birthday parties (where toddlers with sticky fingers inadvertently leave traces of milk everywhere). Three years ago, after a terrifying sprint to my son's school, followed by Epi and the ER, I decided that there must be another way. At the time, I didn't know that there even were food-allergy treatments. But I did my own research - the research of a desperate mother trying to help her kids. And I was amazed by what I found.

We treated our kids' food allergies using tools of modern medicine that have become available over the past decade. They Bay Area is a hub of research and practice in this field. The results have been mind-boggling: all of their food allergies have now been successfully treated. For the past year, our kids have been living normal lives. We treated their food allergies, with a combination of Oral Immunotherapy and Sub-Lingual Immunotherapy with Dr. Sanjeev Jain in Fremont, and an herbal treatment similar to FAHF-2? from researcher Dr. Xiu Min Li at Mount Sinai in New York.

Of the three, Oral Immunotherapy (or "OIT") is the best known. This is where you build tolerance for your allergen by eating tiny amounts, starting with a tiny speck you can barely see, and then building up to eating mouthfuls or more of the allergen. Treatment typically takes about six months.

Sub-Lingual Immunotherapy (or "SLIT") is less well known and involves putting drops of allergen under your tongue. Because the drops can include up to 20-allergens, it is a great way of providing protection against multiple allergens, even if tolerance may not be as great as with Oral Immunotherapy. Risks are also lower. Treatment typically takes about 1-2 months.

The herbal treatment, sometimes referred to as "FAHF-2" in the scientific literature, is a personal treatment that treats the immune system as a whole. As such, it can help mitigate food and environmental allergies, eczema, asthma, and more. The downside is the protocols are challenging, expensive, and take 2-4 years. It was not covered by our insurance, as were the other options.

Yes, these treatments are still considered "experimental" by many. No, they are not easy, and patients are not cured overnight. But the broad consensus is that the treatments really do work, for just about everyone who sticks with treatment. While many kids (like my daughter) sail through treatment with only minor issues, others (like my son) struggle, with real challenges along the way. We persevered and the reward has been a dream come true.

My kids' cases were significantly more complicated than the well-known peanut allergy. My daughter was allergic to peanut, hazelnut, pecan, walnut, cashew, pistachio, buckwheat, and fish. She now freely eats all of these foods, except she can't stand the taste of fish. At a potluck recently, she casually mentioned to me that the cookie she was eating had peanut butter in it. I took a bite and confirmed that it was definitely peanut butter. She continued enjoying the cookie.

My son had an incredible 41 known allergens, including cow's milk, soy milk, multiple nuts, various seeds, and numerous legumes. Post-treatment, he is still a picky eater, so we haven't yet incorporated many of his (former?) allergens into his diet, but I am confident he will have a normal childhood, unencumbered by severe food allergies.

On this 1-year anniversary I am reminded that we need to talk about treatments more publicly, so that families might make the best-informed choices for their children.