



When Food Turns Fatal

Dangerous Food Allergy May Be More Common In Children Than People Know

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WASHINGTON -- Food allergies are pretty common among babies and young children, but some dangerous food allergies might be more common than people know. Margaret Schifflin looks like a healthy, happy, 2-year-old, but the past year has been a living nightmare for her family.

"She was chubby and happy and full of life," Julia Schifflin said. "She just started throwing up, and I didn't know what to do."

Margaret threw up five to six times a day for two weeks, and doctors were puzzled until they realized that she had severe food allergies making her allergic to common foods like cereal, chicken, yogurt, eggs and milk.

"I was poisoning her, that was the thing," Julia Schifflin said. "I'm her mother and I was giving her foods that weren't good for her and I just didn't know."

Margaret has eosinophilic esophagitis, a severe food allergy in which white blood cells build up in the esophagus, causing swelling and narrowing, making it difficult to swallow. In Margaret's case, her condition is coupled with severe vomiting and stomach irritation. She can even get a rash or hives when in contact with some foods.

"It takes two weeks to get one of those foods out of her system," he mother said. "It's not just she gets a rash or she gets an upset tummy. She vomits and it's violent."

Pediatric gastroenterologist Dr. Lynn Duffy said it's a relatively new disease, but they're finding more and more cases. Her Fairfax County practice diagnoses almost two cases a month.

"When patients have it, they can present with reflux-like symptoms, but it's from a very different cause," Duffy said. "It's not acid induced. It's allergy induced."

To control the disease, Margaret must stick to a strict diet -- a tough task because she can only eat very few foods. Staples include pork, potatoes, rice and most vegetables. She has to avoid most other foods, like those with wheat, gluten and dairy.

To supplement her diet, she drinks a special formula that has 100 percent nutrition. The special formula costs more than \$100 per case -- about \$500 a month -- and insurance won't cover it. Next year, the Schifflins hope to get a bill in the Virginia Legislature mandating coverage.

Their insurance company said they'll only cover the formula if Margaret is fed with a feeding tube, but the Schiffkins say that isn't necessary.

"I think it's ridiculous that they're going to deny coverage until we do something drastic," Paul Schiffkin said.

"It's hard to feed a 2-year-old, anyway, but take away Cheerios, take away cake, take away milk, take away cheese, take away so many foods that normal toddlers eat and it makes it more difficult," Julia Schiffkin said.

Doctors don't know if Margaret will ever grow out of her allergies. The disease is still too new, and there hasn't been enough research.

More Information:

- [American Partnership For Eosinophilic Disorders](#)
- [Children's Milk Allergy And Gastrointestinal Coalition](#)
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