

Beer, pizza, Twinkies — food forever off-limits

By CHERYL ALLEN
Features Editor

Sometimes I think I may be the only American who's never had a piece of pizza, a slice of apple pie or even a chocolate chip cookie.

No, I'm not anorexic, and I'm not a health nut. I'm allergic to milk and wheat.

As long as I can remember, I've avoided foods containing either milk or wheat at all costs. That means no bread, no cheese, no ice cream, no yogurt, no milk chocolate and no pasta. No Twinkies, Ho-Hos, Ben & Jerry's, Froot Loops, Nacho Cheese Doritos or Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Closer to many students' hearts, that also means no beer. The hops and other grains used in brewing make me sick long after Tylenol has cured my hangover. (No need to feel too sorry for me, though. Whiskeys are corn-based, and vodka is made with rice.)

But try to eat a sandwich without the bread or cereal without the milk. Sometimes I put orange juice in my cereal bowl in place of milk — yes, I know it sounds disgusting. But with certain cereals, really, it isn't bad. Besides, I don't know the difference. I've never even had milk. How can I miss what I've never tasted?

I developed allergies to milk, wheat and eggs while still being breast-fed. My mother and I became sick shortly after I was born, and the doctors scratched their heads as we worsened and no drug worked. Finally, one doctor suggested that I might be allergic to something, most likely some kind of food.

Literally, they took me off all foods. As I was fed intravenously, my sickness subsided almost immediately. They concluded allergies had triggered my illness. Ironically, allergies had been my mother's ailment also. With no explanation, at the age of 30 she could no longer tolerate milk. But doctors had yet to identify what had made me sick.

They gradually introduced me to foods one at a time before they discovered that milk, wheat and eggs all led to flu-like sickness. I "out-grew" my allergy to eggs, which doctors say is common when the digestive system matures and can handle foods that once irritated it. They told me that if I hadn't "out-grown" the rest of my allergies by the time I reached my teens, I probably never would. At the age of 20, I still avoid milk and wheat like the plague.

So what's the big deal? So I get a little sick, right? Sure. A few days after eating something I am allergic to, I vomit — repeatedly. I get diarrhea. I usually run back and forth between my bedroom and my bathroom. It isn't fun.

Milk and all its by-products give me stomach cramps, usually resulting in vomiting. Wheat strips the lining of my intestines and makes digesting anything nearly impossible until my system has recovered. Recovery usually takes a full two weeks if I eat enough of the forbidden food, or if my resistance is unusually low. In other words, I don't cheat and take a bite of a Snickers bar — it's not worth the risk.

Throughout high school, I didn't talk about my allergies unless I had to. Consequently, I was one of those annoying "salad and water dates" because that way I didn't have to explain why I didn't want lasagna at the best Italian restaurant in town. I always hated going to Pizza Hut, but I smiled and insisted I'd left my appetite at home.

Most of the time, my allergies create a bigger problem for everyone else than they do for me. I know what to avoid, and I can always find some meat or vegetables come meal time. But it isn't always so easy for other people to comprehend.

People stare when I put ketchup on my baked potato, but I can't have butter. No one understands when I order nachos without the cheese, but chips smothered in salsa and taco meat taste just as good to me.

On Thanksgiving one year, I was invited to eat with my boyfriend's family. Backed into a corner, I figured it was about time I told him about my allergies. I brought it up one evening as we sat with his parents. His mother looked at me and said, "Oh, God, and you look like such a normal girl!"

Another evening, near my 10th birthday, my father took me to McDonald's. The place was packed, and we joined the crowds of impatient people waiting for the infamously slow "fast food."

When we finally reached the front of the line, my father decided he didn't want to pay for the bun I wasn't going to eat. As he gave the girl behind the counter our order, she repeated it into the microphone.

"... and I'd like a Big Mac with no bun."
She stopped and stared at us. "Excuse me?" she asked.
"Yes, a Big Mac with no bun." She looked at us as if we were insane. Into the microphone, over the din of the crowded McDonald's, she announced loud and clear, "And we have an order for a Big Mac with no bun. I REPEAT, NO BUN."
The crowd fell silent. The people at the grill stopped and turned toward the counter. The entire staff and the crowd in the restaurant turned and stared at my father and me. I was mortified.

Unsure of what we wanted, the people behind the counter put the pickles, tomatoes, lettuce, ketchup, mustard and mayonnaise in separate little paper cups, and gave me a naked little hamburger wrapped in wax paper.

I swear, everyone in the place took a trip to the bathroom so they could walk by our table and see how I would eat my special Big Mac. I think they were disappointed to see me using a plastic fork and knife.

Aside from a few embarrassing incidents, my allergies don't really bother me, and my diet is only strange to those who aren't used to it. I order lots of salads, plain meats and unbuttered veggies. I drink calcium-fortified orange juice and still manage to find some junk food that won't turn my stomach upside-down.

At parties, I reach past the keg for my Southern Comfort or vodka to mix with cranberry juice. I guess it's all relative, but I'm not THAT far from "normal."

HEY! WE GOT A WEIRD ONE UP HERE! ONE CHEESEBURGER TO GO, MINUS THE BUNS!! THAT'S RIGHT! I SAID MINUS THE BUNS!!



Respiratory, food allergies cause recurrent problems

Food allergies different from food intolerances

By DAWN WILSON
Staff Writer

Bananas are the forbidden fruit for Martha Donaldson, a junior from Charlotte. Beef, pork and milk are also off-limits.

For Valerie Carr, a freshman from Raleigh, merely inhaling the fumes from a seafood dish can cause her tongue to itch and her skin to break out in a rash. Like many, Donaldson and Carr have food allergies.

"It used to be an inconvenience, but now it's a part of life," Donaldson said. "You get used to not being able to eat certain things."

According to William Wood, director of the allergy department at North Carolina Memorial Hospital, some people experience confusion in discerning a food allergy from a food intolerance.

Food intolerance may be due to psychological reasons or substances irritating the stomach, he said. More frequently, food intolerance results from the absence of certain enzymes in the body. For example, an intolerance for milk may be caused by the absence of lactase, an enzyme needed to convert the lactose in milk into glucose, which the body uses as an energy source.

However, a true allergy to certain foods is caused when the body produces too much of the antibody immune globulin E (IgE). This overpro-

duction is often hereditary but may be caused by parasites or the intake of drugs, Wood said.

True allergy sufferers must often avoid certain foods.

"A food may or may not cause a reaction, or even a reaction to the same degree, but if you are allergic, you remain allergic," Wood said.

It is often difficult to determine the source of a food allergy, because symptoms may not appear until hours after the food has been consumed.

The food causing the problem can be found by examining the history of the patient's food consumption in relationship to a rash or onset of stomach cramps. Patients are also asked to keep a food diary, recording everything eaten, no matter how insignificant, even chewing on a pencil eraser.

Carr's allergy was discovered while she was still in elementary school by the same technique used to discover hay fever and pollen allergies. The back is pricked and the skin is exposed to an extract of the food or substance believed to cause the allergy. If the skin displays signs of irritation or rash, the allergen has been discovered.

Carr's food allergy is so severe that inhaling the fumes of a seafood dish or any physical contact with seafood could cause a serious reaction. Because of her sensitivity to the food, she must always carry Benedryl.

"I hated always having to carry Benedryl all the time. My parents like seafood, and whenever they went to a seafood place, I would have to carry it along in case I had a reaction ... I can't tell when it's going to happen."

People combat allergies by employing the same methods used to fight hay fever and other allergies.

Wood said, "The only safe way to treat food allergies is to avoid the food. You can build up a resistance by administering small doses [of the food] and gradually increasing the dosage, but the problem here is that if you go off the food for awhile and then consume it again, an allergy attack may occur."

Although antihistamines may provide some relief, Wood said some people attempted to seek relief by taking allergy shots that were often ineffective and, in his opinion, unsafe.

Avoidance is the answer for Carr, despite the inconvenience of inquiring about the contents of casseroles and other dishes. "The only seafood I have tasted was accidental and was only a small amount. You can't miss something you haven't had."

Dealing with allergies has caused Wood to respect the delicate balance of the body.

"The amazing fact is not that some people have trouble with food allergies; the amazing fact is that we all don't have trouble with them."

Allergies account for 10 percent of medical visits

By STEPHANIE SPIEGEL
Staff Writer

Allergies — even the word makes eyes tear and noses itch.

Sneezing, coughing and congestion are all too familiar for the one in five Americans between the ages of 6 and 74 suffering from respiratory allergies.

The National Center for Health Statistics reports nearly 10 percent of medical visits involve allergies. With such statistics, many allergy sufferers expect doctors to understand allergic reactions and what causes them.

But this expectation may not always be fulfilled.

Nancy Albright, staff nurse at Student Health Services, said many students misunderstood the purpose of the allergy clinic located in SHS.

"Students often come into the allergy clinic with symptoms of headache, nausea or vomiting," she said. "The students ask to be tested for allergies, but the allergy clinic does not test for allergies."

The clinic administers prescription and over-the-counter drugs, as well as allergy shots, depending on the type of allergy, Albright said.

Many students don't know what allergies are or what causes them.

An allergic response starts when the immune system mistakes harmless materials for "invaders" and activates mast cells located in the nose, eyes and

lungs, she said.

Mast cells contain histamine, a chemical that triggers an allergic response when released. It is harmless, unless a sensitive person is exposed to an allergen, she said.

Once exposed, the mast cell membranes break down and trigger the symptoms of the allergy. Allergies vary from reactions to dust, cosmetics, animals, chemicals, metals and even beer, Albright said.

The clinic treats allergies to trees, dust and mold most often, she said.

Common symptoms of allergies range from coughing, sneezing, watery eyes, itchy nose, headaches, fatigue, nausea and diarrhea to swelling of the eyes or lips, Albright said.

Some symptoms exist year-round, while others are only apparent during certain seasons or certain times of the day, she said.

"Spring and fall are the worst seasons because there is a lot of pollen in the air, and flowers and trees are blooming," Albright said.

The only cure for allergies is time. Some allergies eventually disappear, yet the process could take decades.

Meanwhile, allergists administer over-the-counter and prescription drugs, and they can give allergy shots called hyposensitization.

This involves injecting a small amount of the allergy-causing agent

into the body in an effort to build up antibodies which would combat the allergies in the future.

"The serum is administered to hopefully decrease the body's response to allergens," she said. Injection schedules vary, most lasting several years.

Jennifer Deal, a sophomore education major from Taylorsville, is allergic to cats, dust and mold. She gets allergy shots weekly.

"I have noticed a big improvement since the onset of the shots," she said. When she began treatment, her allergies frequently made her sick.

"Intensity of allergies depends on the individual," Albright said. Like Deal, some are constantly bothered by their allergies and finally seek help.

Other people, like Nicole Huntley, suffer less severe reactions. The sophomore from Wadesboro has hay fever and is allergic to pollen. She experiences the typical sneezing, runny nose and congestion commonly associated with minor allergic reactions.

Allergy sufferers know that the symptoms are not pleasant. "I feel like there's a freight train up my nose," Huntley said.

Huntley depends on over-the-counter drugs control her allergies, but they don't solve all her problems. "Being that over-the-counter drugs provide only temporary relief, we allergy sufferers keep drug stores in business."