



CAUTION

ANAPHYLAXIS

A personal account

Have you ever associated food with fatality? Have you ever felt anxious, as if you could be eating your Last Supper? **Oli Weatherall** has.

Anaphylaxis is a severe and often sudden allergic reaction. It can occur when someone with allergies is exposed to something to which they are allergic. Reactions usually begin within minutes and rapidly progress, but can occur up to three hours later. Anaphylaxis is potentially life-threatening, and always requires an

immediate emergency response.

Around one third of the UK population (approximately 19 million people) will develop an allergy at some time in their lives. A significant proportion of these, around a million people, suffer severe symptoms.

I have had multiple severe reactions to peanuts and sesame – but it is possible to have an anaphylactic reaction to almost anything, not just food.

Formative years

I seemed to be destined to develop multiple food allergies. I was born by caesarean section, which may negatively impact gut flora. I had a very strong course of IV antibiotics at an early age and there is growing evidence that gut health is linked to allergies – a recent study in *Nature Medicine* “identified culturable human-origin bacteria that modulate the immune system to become tolerant to food allergens”.

The advice I was given as a child with an egg allergy – which I outgrew at 12 years old – was to avoid peanuts. This advice would no longer be given by clinicians.

I did not build up a tolerance to peanuts, therefore, it is unsurprising that my body’s immune response treated the harmless peanut protein as if it were a threat. I had eczema as a child, which is known to increase the likelihood of developing food allergies.

My mum has asthma and allergies to certain animals, which increases propensity of developing allergies. The only favourable thing was I spent a huge amount of time outside as a child, an absence is proposed to contribute to the allergy epidemic.

Anxiety

There have been several studies to quantify the impact of food allergies on quality of life, and they have consistently shown a negative impact. Food Allergy Research and Education is the world’s largest non-profit organisation dedicated to food allergy awareness. It has published research that states of food allergy centres surveyed: “More than 90% serve patients and parents who have anxiety related to food allergy. Nearly 70% treat patients who suffer food allergy-related panic attacks. More than 70% treat patients who report food allergy bullying. Of 500 patients and caregivers surveyed,



300Mg

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two-thirds report mental health concerns related to food allergy.”

It continues: “Only one in six patients and one in seven caregivers had received food allergy-related mental health services, more than half want resources to help them cope with food allergy stress and anxiety.”

Food allergy anxiety is hard to cope with, I believe it is not “curable” – it is a biological response. Those of us living with anaphylaxis are aware that a miniscule amount of our allergen could kill us – even a few milligrams of peanut protein could cause me a fatal reaction, one peanut has around 300 milligrams.

Living with food allergies constitutes a unique stressor, which is chronic and acute – after a decade of this and multiple severe allergic reactions, it can be hard to approach life the same way as before. My behaviour has altered, I am more risk-adverse in an attempt to avoid reliving these traumatic experiences.

High-risk activities

Sharing and connection are innate drives we have. However, due to the danger certain forms of sharing and connection may present we can become isolated and live in fear, while simultaneously craving these exact things. Sharing drinks, food or a kiss can be seen as threats, rather than opportunities. We battle against our innate drives to keep ourselves safe.

Many things that people may take for granted, such as eating out, travelling,

holidays and intimate relationships, are inherently harder and more stressful for those of us living with food allergies. These activities can be viewed as high-risk, anxiety provoking scenarios rather than fun, exciting and relaxing as they are usually perceived.

I have found that taking unnecessary risks caused me crippling anxiety, for example, I used to eat out without inquiring about whether the food was safe, I followed the same approach when kissing someone. I have learned saying no to certain things reduces my anxiety and makes life easier to deal with.

I have finally become fully cognisant of the wisdom of my gut in keeping me safe, I trust it without fail, it knows more than my limited consciousness does.

I have not eaten out for two years due to negative experiences. I only feel truly safe to eat and prepare food at home. Due to this and after finding it difficult to find suitable recipes that I did not have to significantly alter, I started Free From Fourteen Vegan, where I post recipes online that are free from the EU’s

fourteen major food allergens and animals products – the recipes can be eaten by most people without having to be altered to be safe for them to eat.

As a result of the widespread use of peanuts in pubs/bars and having a reaction in a pub where loose peanuts are served, my mum and I started a campaign to encourage pubs to remove all peanuts from the bar/drinking areas of their establishment. We already have commitment from a chain of pubs and hope more follow suit. Empathy, awareness and education are the keys to improving the lives of those with anaphylaxis. **BMS**

Oli Weatherall is completing a BA in Business Management. Read this article with references, at thebiomedicalscientist.net Visit Oli’s webpage at [instagram.com/freefromfourteenvegan](https://www.instagram.com/freefromfourteenvegan)

