

Life a nightmare with allergies

SHOPPING for groceries these days can be so easy. We can do it online at our convenience or we can just pop by a supermarket.

Unfortunately, it is not as easy for Rohani Ahmad (not her real name). It can take her up to an hour to find just one product, while others could spend the same amount of time to complete their entire grocery list.

It is just one of the untold difficulties of a parent of children with severe allergies, says Prof Madya Dr Intan Hakimah Ismail, a clinical specialist in paediatric allergy and immunology at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

"Parents with children who are allergic to multiple food ingredients have to spend a long time studying the food labels of every product they buy," she said.

"Their lives can be described a living nightmare because even a simple task can become immeasurably difficult."

However, not many appreciate the difficulties faced by those with food allergies. The ignorant would simply laugh it off and call them fussy eaters.

This attitude can take a life-threatening turn when it comes to caring for children with food allergies, as some allergic reactions can be fatal.

The sad reality is many childminders pay no heed to the countless reminders by parents of their children's allergies, says Dr Intan.

"Children allergic to certain foods have to be careful with what they eat. Those allergic to cow's milk, eggs or nuts have to completely avoid food containing such ingredients," she said.

"Ingesting those can cause swelling around the mouth and eyes, rashes, diarrhoea and a condition called 'urticaria' (hives). It could also cause eczema and

blood in the stools."

The first Malaysian Allergy Awareness Survey by the Malaysian Society of Allergy and Immunology (MSAI) recently listed the top five most common food allergens — based on information from 8,000 respondents nationwide — as seafood (90 per cent), nuts (47 per cent), soy (44 per cent), wheat (30 per cent) and eggs (30 per cent).

The survey, a joint effort with UPM, was carried out from Dec 1 last year to March 31 this year and was aimed at assessing public understanding of allergies.

The survey was also aimed to help disseminate information on how allergies could lead to more serious complications and the need to view it as a chronic disease.

There is a worldwide increase in allergy cases, affecting 30 to 35 per cent of the world population throughout their lives. This has made allergic diseases among the major epidemics in the world. What is of a graver concern is that many are not aware allergies are not only triggered by food.

"Many are mistaken in thinking allergies are only triggered by certain foods. There is also allergy of the nasal cavities (allergic rhinitis) and allergy of the eye (conjunctivitis), asthma and eczema, among others," she said.

"Allergic reactions happen when our immune system becomes extra sensitive towards something in the environment that it believes to be harmful to the body."

Dr Intan said among possible allergens were certain foods, the environment (mites, mold, pollen, pets), medication and insect bites.

These allergens usually pose little to no problem in most people. However, the immune system of those with allergies will release an antibody known as IgE.

The antibody then signals certain cells in the body to release a chemical in the bloodstream known as histamine, which then causes a reaction in the eyes, nose, throat, lungs or other affected organs.

This would then cause what is known as an allergic reaction.

"The symptoms depend on the kind of allergies one has. For eczema, the symptom is a dry and itchy rash. Those with rhinitis tend to have sneezing fits in the morning, itchy nasal cavities, prolonged cold, runny nose and blocked nose," she said.

"Those with conjunctivitis may experience symptoms like itchy and red eyes while those with asthma may experience shortness of breath and wheezing, among others."

The most severe allergic reaction is anaphylaxis, which occurs within seconds or minutes after exposure to the allergen and can be fatal.

The symptoms of anaphylaxis include difficulty in breathing and swallowing, swelling of the lips, tongue, throat or other parts of the body, dizziness or fainting.

It has yet to be discovered why some people experience allergic reactions and others do not.

What has been established, however, is that it is linked to genetics, the environment and dietary intake. If a parent has an allergy, the risk of it being passed on to the children is 20 to 40 per cent. The risk soars to between 50 and 80 per cent if both parents have allergies.

It is estimated four out of five children are at risk of having allergies if both their parents have it.

"However, this does not mean parents without allergies need not worry.

There is still a 10 to 20 per cent chance of their children getting allergies,"

Dr Intan said.

There has yet to be a cure or treatment which can completely heal people of their allergies.

However, the MSAI survey showed 50 per cent of Malaysian respondents believe there is a cure for it.

"There is currently no cure for allergies, so the main goal should be prevention," said MSAI president Dr Amir Hamzah Datuk Abdul Latiff, when discussing the findings of the survey.

Besides guarding from exposure to allergens, patients should also practise a balanced diet. Babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first six months. Breastfeeding should be continued after they have started on solids, up until they are over two years old.

If there is difficulty in giving a baby breast milk, partially hydrolysed protein (php) has been clinically proven as an alternative which can help reduce the risk of allergies.

"Early treatment and prevention can help in improving the quality of lives of those with allergies as well as their families. It is in the best interest of parents of children with allergies to inform teachers and friends about their children's allergies," Dr Intan said.

"Prepare your own food when going on holidays or on other outings." — Bernama

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Parents of children with allergies usually spend more time when buying groceries because they have to pay particular attention to the ingredients in the products to avoid allergic reactions.