

Allergic reactions to peanuts, tree nuts, and seeds aboard commercial airliners.

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Authors: Sarah S Comstock, Rich DeMera, Laura C Vega, Eric J Boren, Sean Deane, Lori A D Haapanen, Suzanne S Teuber

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Public Summary:

Scientific Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Minimal data exist on the prevalence and characteristics of in-flight reactions to foods. OBJECTIVES: To characterize reactions to foods experienced by passengers aboard commercial airplanes and to examine information about flying with a food allergy available from airlines. METHODS: Telephone questionnaires were administered to individuals in a peanut, tree nut, and seed allergy database who self-reported reactions aboard aircraft. Airlines were contacted to obtain information on food allergy policies. RESULTS: Forty-one of 471 individuals reported allergic reactions to food while on airplanes, including 4 reporting more than 1 reaction. Peanuts accounted for most of the reactions. Twenty-one individuals (51%) treated their reactions during flight. Only 12 individuals (29%) reported the reaction to a flight attendant. Six individuals went to an emergency department after landing, including 1 after a flight diversion. Airline personnel were notified of only 3 of these severe reactions. Comparison of information given to 3 different investigators by airline customer service representatives showed that inconsistencies regarding important information occurred, such as whether the airline regularly serves peanuts. CONCLUSIONS: In this group of mainly adults with severe nut/seed allergy, approximately 9% reported experiencing an allergic reaction to food while on board an airplane. Some reactions were serious and potentially life-threatening. Individuals commonly did not inform airline personnel about their experiences. In addition, the quality of information about flying with food allergies available from customer service departments is highly variable and, in some cases, incomplete or inaccurate.

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