

Living a full life despite life-threatening allergies

Just the smell of eggs used to make Corey Yong break out in skin rashes and hives.

Amily Goh finds out what lifestyle changes he and his family had to make to accommodate his food allergies.

FOR FIVE years, the Yong family could not walk past restaurants, bakeries, or food courts. They even stopped dining at eateries.

At just six months old, Corey, the younger of the family's two children, was found to have an airborne allergy to eggs, milk and peanuts.

This means that simply inhaling the scent of these foods, by walking past a hawker centre, could trigger a reaction.

At that time, his mother, Ms Amanda Chan, 45, had been eating a dish of eggs Benedict when Corey's face began to swell up with hives.

He was immediately rushed to the Children's Emergency Department.

When someone's face swells up, it can lead to breathing difficulties, which can be

life-threatening.

Corey, now 10, also has eczema, which makes his skin dry, itchy and red.

This "leaky" skin barrier allows particles (including those that he is allergic to) to easily enter via the skin, prompting an immune response that causes allergic reactions.

FACING PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES

To protect Corey, a doctor specialising in allergies recommended strict avoidance – a measure Ms Chan described as both "effective and brutal."

For five years, the family stopped going out to eat entirely and avoided areas where food smells were present.

Even family gatherings became rare. She said: "Socially, it was tough because people didn't understand and questioned if strict avoidance was necessary."

Corey's older brother, Riley, 12, who is not allergic to any food, also avoids eating anything his younger brother is allergic to.

To take care of Corey, Ms Chan quit her full-time job as a private banker when he was one year old.

The financial burden also grew. Allergen-free

groceries, like vegan mayonnaise, cost two to three times more than regular items. "But we don't have a choice," said Ms Chan.

If Corey is invited to a birthday party, Ms Chan would bake a slice of dairy-free cake for Corey to bring along for himself.

And when teachers or schoolmates distribute snacks he cannot eat, such as buns or Hello Panda snacks, he gives them away.

Every day without fail, Ms Chan prepares home-cooked food for Corey to bring to school.

On days where Corey has to stay back after school, she makes a second trip to deliver a second lunchbox.

As Corey grew older, he has outgrown airborne food allergies.

This year, he was finally able to buy food from school.

The chicken rice stall owner kindly agreed to accommodate his needs. To avoid cross-contamination, she uses separate utensils for braised eggs and chicken.

For him, the temptation is not hard to resist as the discomfort that comes along with the allergy is worse. "My throat would feel very itchy, but I cannot scratch it," said Corey.

EVENTUAL ACCEPTANCE

Food is often seen as something that brings people together.

But for the family, it once felt like the very thing that pulled them apart, Ms Chan said.

ASSESSING FOOD ALLERGIES

National University Hospital (NUH) and KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) recently announced a new study, the Singapore Food Allergy Study, on June 26 to find out how common food allergies are among children in Singapore and their impact on their health. The study started because more and more kids here are getting food allergies.

Researchers will spend the first two years finding participants and collecting data, and the next two years studying the data. Both Corey and his mother have signed up to participate in the study.



As Corey has now outgrown airborne food allergies, his parents can now consume food that he is allergic to when around him.

"In the beginning, I kept wondering why it had to be us," she said. "But over time, I've come to terms with it."

Small acts of kindness now mean a lot.

"When people go out of their way to accommodate us, it really moves me to tears,"

she added.

She hopes more people will understand that allergies are not a matter of choice.

"They're invisible, and perhaps that's where the stigma lies. People sometimes ask if it's really that serious. But it is."

WHAT ARE ALLERGIES?

Food allergies occur when the immune system mistakenly identifies a food as harmful. The body experiences symptoms that can range from mild itching or eczema, to life-threatening breathing difficulties.

Common things that people are allergic to – called allergens – include eggs, milk, peanuts and shellfish.

In extremely serious cases, a person's blood pressure may drop, he may become unable to breathe, and may faint.

People who are extremely allergic to certain things may carry around a medical device called an EpiPen, to inject themselves with medicine to save their lives.

To check if a person is allergic to something, doctors put tiny drops of food like milk on the patient's arm, then lightly poke the skin. This is called the skin prick test.

Alternatively, patients are exposed to allergens under clinical supervision. This is called a food challenge.

There is no real cure to allergies, apart from naturally outgrowing them, which is when your body eventually stops reacting to it.



Corey (left) with his older brother, Riley, who does not have any food allergies. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF AMANDA CHAN