

Better safe than sorry



CAPTION: Jane Nordberg/Daily Mining Gazette

Tracie Mulari Schrand decorates Christmas cookies Dec. 23 with her daughters, Sidney, 8, and Melissa, 3, at the home of Tracie's parents, Judy and Denny Mulari, in Trimountain. The family must be exceptionally careful around Melissa, who is severely allergic to peanuts.

By JANE NORDBERG, DMG Writer

TRIMOUNTAIN — Most parents encourage their young children to share, but for three-year-old Melissa Schrand, sharing can be deadly.

Melissa is one of the more than 12 million people in America who suffer from food allergies. More specifically, she's one of 1.5 million Americans who suffer from a peanut allergy.

The allergy was discovered when Tracie Schrand fed her daughter, then 15 months old, some peanut butter. Immediately, a small lump formed on Melissa's lip, dismissed at first by her mother as sensitive skin.

On the advice of a pediatrician, Melissa underwent allergy testing a few months later, and had such a strong reaction to peanuts that the test was immediately stopped.

"Right away, we went from a family who always had a dish of candy on the counter to one that checked every ingredients label that came in the house," Tracie said. "That was the day everything changed."

Schrand, formerly Mulari, is a Jeffers High School and Michigan Tech University graduate

now living in downstate Farmington Hills. Visiting her parents in Trimountain over the holidays, she said she was stunned by how little information was available on food allergies in under-five-year-olds.

“I found no books for young children to begin learning how to stay safe with food allergies,” she said. “If (Melissa) were 12 years old, I could trust her to know what to do. But I can’t, she’s only 3.”

The revelation was the catalyst for Tracie to publish a food allergy awareness book for young children. “A Day at the Playground” reminds youngsters to wash their hands before eating anything or touching their mouths, to avoid trash, and to never share food without asking mom or dad first.

“All kids should be able to play safely,” Tracie said. “My book is written and illustrated with the young in mind; to help them learn to live with their food allergy and avoid allergic reactions.”

The book is just one part of Tracie’s online business, **www.allergyavenue.com**, which also offers a water bottle, lanyard and a teddy bear wearing the business’ signature slogan, “Ask Before You Share.”

Tracie developed the slogan to remind classmates, parents and school officials of the severity of food allergies. “So many people do not realize that if a child has a milk or nut allergy, it’s not just a cup of milk or a peanut butter sandwich to avoid, but also anything made with milk or processed in a facility where nuts are present,” Tracie said. “My goal is to help people understand that food allergies aren’t just an inconvenience, they’re a whole lifestyle change.”

Trace amounts of peanut, for instance, can be found in many foods, from pretzels to some sauces. In Melissa’s case, someone who has eaten a peanut sandwich and touched a doorknob is a danger to her, because she is likely to touch the same doorknob and then put her fingers in her mouth.

Getting Melissa to understand what she can and cannot eat will become more crucial as she prepares to enter the school system, Tracie added.

“She needs to know that she can’t eat a chocolate cupcake someone else might bring in for a treat,” Tracie said. “It’s unfortunate, but it’s necessary to protect her health.”

The “Ask Before You Share” slogan protects anyone of any age, regardless of allergy, she said. Currently, there are eight main types of food allergies: peanut, tree nut, shellfish, fish, egg, soy, milk and wheat. But the slogan extends to other allergies, such as latex, she added.

So far, the [allergyavenue.com](http://www.allergyavenue.com) Web site seems to be achieving its goal of raising allergy awareness, Tracie said.

“A lot of schools are using the window clings and the teddy bears just as a reminder in the classroom,” she said.

To help keep Melissa safe, no one in the Schrand family eats any nuts at all, and food of unknown processing origin or ingredients is prohibited.

As a result, Melissa has shown a marked improvement in her tolerance, reducing her reaction severity from a 4+ to the 1-2 range.

Still, Tracie said, more can be done both at home and in the school systems to keep children safe.

“A lot of parents don’t even tell the school nurse about their child’s allergy because they don’t want them labeled,” Tracie said. “At some point you have to stop and ask yourself the question of what is more important, being labeled or being safe?”

The Schrand’s other two daughters, Laurie (18) and Sidney (8) have no symptoms of food allergies. Melissa also has a 20 to 25 percent chance of outgrowing the allergy.

Until then, however, strict avoidance and raising awareness is the Schrand family mantra.

“I’m just like any other mom in that nothing is more important than my family’s health,” Tracie said. “Nothing.”

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