Managing Food Allergies At College:  
A Prospective Student’s Guide

College is typically the first time that you will live on your own as a young adult. Taking on full responsibility for your food allergy can be intimidating, but with the proper preparation, knowledge and support, you can manage your food allergies successfully. Take some time to learn about the departments and resources colleges offer and understand the responsibilities you will need to take on.

Prepare for College Early

In the same way you begin your academic preparations for college while you are in high school, it is important to start early as you prepare for handling your food allergies at college. Your parents may want to help you through the early process of evaluating and selecting colleges, but when it comes to the day-to-day management of food allergies at college, you will be the one working with your school directly. While you are still in high school, you can take the following steps to get prepared:

- Practice communicating your needs to those around you, including friends and faculty. For example, if you don’t already explain your food allergies when eating out, start doing it. Use a Food Allergy Alert Chef Card to help communicate your needs to restaurant staff. You can download a free chef card from FARE at: www.safefare.org/chefcard
- Consider your daily needs and what accommodations you might require at college. For example, will you require a dorm room with a private microwave or a mini-fridge? Will you be safe living with another student or will you need a private room? Begin making a list.
- Think about and try new ways to minimize your risk and still be included socially. For example, research restaurants that are well-versed in food allergies and suggest them when going out with friends.

Remember: It’s never too early to start preparing. As you head off to college, you will become increasingly independent and take on full responsibility for your food allergies. You can also practice food allergy self-management well before you graduate high school. It will help smooth your transition to college.
**Start with Disability Services**

Students with food allergies may be protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This means that accommodations for your food allergies should fall under the school’s disability services office, and this is the first department you should approach on campus. Ask disability services:

- Do you understand that food allergy accommodations may fall under the ADA?
- Does the school have a comprehensive food allergy policy in place?
- Will you coordinate my accommodations and emergency action plan with other relevant departments, including housing, dining and health services?
- What emergency procedures are in place in case of an anaphylactic reaction? If needed, will staff give epinephrine?
- What documentation do I need for accommodation requests?

**Remember:** Food allergies may be a new topic for some disability services staff. While schools might not give you all the answers you want to hear, most will be willing to work with you to keep you safe and included. Be patient and willing to work with the school to find mutually agreeable solutions.

**Build Relationships with Dining Services**

As a student with food allergies, you’ll have a lot of interaction with the dining services department, and it’s important to speak with them directly. Even if disability services handles your dining accommodations, developing a two-way communication directly with dining services is important. Ask dining services:

- How do you accommodate your current students with food allergies?
- Can I tour the dining facility during normal service hours? This will help you see how the dining hall functions during busier times.
- Has the dining staff undergone any food allergy training, and are there ongoing training reminders? Ask questions about cross-contact and how your food will be prepared. Also ask whether staff have been trained to recognize anaphylaxis and what the emergency procedures in dining facilities are.
- How can students access allergen information for the menus? Are ingredients listed online, in the dining hall or available by request?
- Who is the designated person in the dining hall who will answer questions about food allergies?

**Remember:** You need to self-identify and disclose your food allergies to the dining services department. Reach out to the registered dietitian, chef or manager to introduce yourself and get started.

**Meet with Housing Services**

If you plan to live on campus, housing services is another department that will have a big impact on your experience. Each student’s housing needs may vary, so you’ll want to think about what (if any) housing accommodations you’ll need ahead of time. Ask housing services:

- Does the school have the resources to offer the housing accommodations I need?
- Will my resident advisor (RA) be trained on food allergies, signs of an allergic reaction, emergency procedure and how to administer epinephrine? Will the school allow my RA to administer my epinephrine in case of an emergency?
- Will the school educate other students living in the dorms about the symptoms and treatment for an allergic reaction?
- How will my food accommodations at special events like student orientation and dorm celebrations be handled?

**Remember:** The answer to some of your questions and requests may not be what you want to hear. Have a backup plan in place and be prepared to educate and advocate for yourself.
Fulfill Your Responsibilities at College

Just like your school has a responsibility to you, you have responsibilities to the college and yourself. Before your first semester starts, you should:

- **Disclose your food allergies to dining, disability and housing as soon as possible.** It is ultimately your responsibility to tell the college you have a food allergy. The sooner your school understands your needs, the better prepared they can be to smooth your transition to college.

- **Know what expectations your college has of you.** Your school, and the various departments you work with, may have a list of student responsibilities they expect you to fulfill.

- **Plan for your ongoing healthcare.** What doctor will you see? How will you remember expiration dates and refills? What pharmacy will you go to?

- **Know your emergency response plan for your room, dining hall and around campus.** Have an emergency care plan and make sure that plan has been communicated to all relevant university staff including dining, disability services and your RA. You can find the FARE Emergency Care Plan here: [www.foodallergy.org/faap](http://www.foodallergy.org/faap)

- **If you are 18 or older, consider whether giving a trusted adult healthcare power of attorney is right for you.** In the event you are unable to communicate, this would give that person the ability to give and get information about your health and make healthcare decisions. For more information and healthcare power of attorney forms, visit [www.americanbar.org](http://www.americanbar.org).

Once you’re on campus, be your own best advocate for your health and safety.

- Carry your epinephrine auto-injectors, inhalers and any other emergency medication with you at all times. Accidents are never planned, but you must plan for an accident.

- Keep an open line of communication with university staff members involved in your accommodations. Remember to thank them for their efforts on your behalf and tell them when they’re doing a good job. If there is a problem, reach out to them immediately. Your school cannot fix a problem if they don’t know it exists.

- College is a time of new experiences, and it will be tempting to take risks with your food allergies. Consuming alcohol can be especially risky because it may not have ingredient labels and it increases risk-taking behaviors. Be smart and plan ahead for social events so you can attend without risking your safety.

- You may find yourself eating at restaurants or attending catered events while in college. Be prepared to call the restaurant or caterer in advance to make sure they can accommodate your food allergies. Bring the Food Allergy Alert chef cards with you to restaurants and send them ahead of time to caterers.

- Seek out support. Check with your school to see if there is a group for students with food allergies, celiac disease, other dietary restrictions or medical concerns. Join the FARE College Food Allergy Support Group on Facebook for online support.

For more information and tips, visit [www.foodallergy.org/collegeprogram](http://www.foodallergy.org/collegeprogram)