

Food allergies in the office

Today I received an enquiry from a lady who had had an allergic reaction at work when a colleague opened a packet of peanuts in front of her. I thought it might be helpful to share my reply.

It might be helpful to look at this from a number of perspectives:

- Ensuring the environment around you is safe for you
- Ensuring that the people around you understand and can help keep you safe
- Ensuring that if you do have a reaction, it is properly managed

The environment - considerations

Could you work at the same desk / work station / use the same chair all the time - ideally at the end / by the wall where others are unlikely to pass?

Could you have wipes to clean your own work station / desk / computer / keyboard / mouse / phone / equipment?

Could you have a cover to put over your desk / work station / chair at the end of your shift to protect it from accidental allergen contact - maybe with a notice telling people to leave it alone?

Could you have and use your own bin?

Colleague understanding

There is a balance between your privacy and your safety. You will need to decide how many people (potentially 1000 I guess) you would like to know about your allergies and also what you need from colleagues.

Depending on how you feel, you could put some signs on and around your desk eg Please keep nuts and peanuts away from this area as I have a severe allergy - thank you

One of the problems is that people don't realise they are actually handing nuts - eg come back from lunch with a pot of pesto pasta / chocolate bar all over their mouse mat etc....

How much would you like to actively alert and even train your colleagues? Would you like help from the Health and Safety team / HR?

What can you do to engage with new colleagues?

Make sure that key people are aware of your allergies for away days / corporate hospitality etc and remind them every time there is an event

Mention your allergy when people are planning to make or buy food / birthday cakes etc

Managing any reaction

Find out who the first aiders are and talk to them informally

Show them your auto injectors and any other meds eg inhalers and where you keep them

Get the trainers for your auto injector and do demos with colleagues and first aiders

Talk to those who work near you / your line manager / people working for you and ask them to make a commitment to support you

Talk about reactions you have had in the past, what the symptoms were, treatment given and timing

Above all, thank everybody regularly for their vigilance and kindness looking after you and keeping you reaction-free.