

Forty years on...

Forty years ago tonight (June 14th, 1978) I ate a chocolate-coated caramel which very nearly ended my life. I knew within minutes that the usual minor symptoms were not going away, and were getting worse. I looked my father in the eye and said, "I'm in trouble." He made a phone call, and we got in the car and drove a few miles to the home of a young female locum GP. I collapsed as I fell out of the car and again at her front door. I can remember lying on her sitting room floor drifting in and out of consciousness as she worked to find a vein in either arm. I don't know what treatment I received but eventually it worked and I realised that I was going to live. The decision had been made for me. Unfortunately this also coincided with violent vomiting and diarrhoea and whole body hives and urticaria.



I was then given fast acting antihistamine (which had been part of my atopic life for many years) and 5 days of high dose steroid tablets. We were all exhausted, and we all knew exactly how close a call this had been.

The following day we contacted the manufacturer of the caramel chocolate. In an era before allergen management and 'may contain' labelling, we learned that coating chocolate was removed from the wonky ones and re-used (reworked) into milk chocolate coating for other chocolates. There was enough of the nut(s) to which I was allergic to endanger my life.

Allergens were not then managed or specifically labelled. 'May contain' labelling for possible cross contamination would not be implemented for nearly 20 years.

Before the age of auto-injectors, I was given an adrenaline inhaler to carry everywhere. It got me through some pretty challenging years – university, working in catering, living in other countries. I also got a medical ID bracelet, and was confident about what I needed to avoid and making this known to others. Having a nut allergy and being called Hazel helped!

This reaction which could have killed me became my life-saver – the critical moment when I found out exactly what this meant. Unlike many others, I was given a chance.

For nearly 25 of these 40 years, my work has included advocacy, research and training to understand and reduce allergy risks. A new review paper published this week summarises how much more we now know about food allergen and food allergy management and risks, and how much more we need to understand to protect those at risk.

See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cea.13144>

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