The Claremont Unified School District recently decided to go "peanut-free" this fall, meaning that CUSD schools will no longer serve peanut products or food cooked in peanut oils. The decision is in response to 49 reported cases of peanut allergies within the district.

CUSD goes peanut free

Within the last few years, the amount of people that have peanut allergies and allergic reactions to foods in general have significantly increased. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, peanut allergies affect nearly two percent of the American population and is also the most common cause of death due to food-related allergies.

The Claremont Unified School District recently has taken measures to deal with the growing peanut allergy conflict within the district, making the move to have all of its K-12 schools peanut-free this fall. The move will mean the end of CUSD providing peanut-related products and also foods that are prepared in peanut oil.

“We’re doing it,” said Mike Bateman, CUSD executive director of student services. “Right now we have 49 reported cases within the district and there has been a significant growth
within the last two to 3 years. Also the severity of the cases has grown.”

**Board gets the word**

Mr. Bateman gave a presentation to the CUSD board at the previous board meeting on August 6. The presentation highlighted the efforts of the various school sites that have dealt with the multiple cases, the development of an individual care plan for the students that have allergic reactions to peanuts, and also accommodations that are provided for the students.

Some of the accommodations that have already been in place within CUSD are the use of epi-pens (an auto injector device that holds a single dose of adrenaline to help prevent severe allergic reactions), peanut-free tables during break and lunch, and also reminders on the importance of proper hygiene. School nurses play a significant role in the handling of the cases as they communicate with the families of the students with peanut allergies and also provide training for teachers to help monitor the affected students.

“The cases are balanced across the district [in terms of grade level]. But the more severe cases have been with elementary students,” Mr. Bateman explained. “The allergic reactions can also come by touch or smell. For instance, a student eats a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and then uses a computer but the student who uses the computer after him ends up having an allergic reaction.”

**Symptoms**

The symptoms involved with peanut allergies range from mild to severe with the more severe symptoms being eczema (a skin disease), hives (itchy welts that form on the skin), anaphylaxis (reaction that can cause breathing problems and loss of consciousness) and asthma. Digestive problems also can be associated with allergic reactions to peanuts.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases reports that food allergies cause “roughly 30,000 episodes of anaphylaxis and 100 to 200 deaths per year in the United States.” Food allergies are more prevalent among children than adults according to the institute, yet an estimated 20 percent of the children with the condition will outgrow it.

**Local doctor speaks up**

While experts disagree on what is the specific cause of the allergic reactions to peanuts, Glenn Miya, a medical doctor within the Chaparral Medical Group in Claremont, believes that that families who have children with the condition need to be aware of what the condition is and how prevent it from occurring.

“My advice to the families is to be conscientious and highly vigilant when it comes to being informed and reading the labels on foods,” said Dr. Miya, who performs pediatrics and internal medicine. “Another thing is to be aware that some foods come in contact with traces of peanut proteins. This happens with a number of popular foods such as ice cream, salad dressing, cereal, cookies and other pastries.”

Because peanut allergies can be triggered by touch, smell and exposure, Dr. Miya sees the
educational aspect of the condition as being a critical one.

“Many times kids will exchange food at school or they may be exposed to trace amounts of peanut and not know what is happening,” he said. “We’ve had a case in which a mother had eaten a peanut butter sandwich and minutes later kissed her child. As a result, her child had an allergic reaction and ended up in the hospital.”

**Food director vigilant**

Being alert about the ingredients of foods that may contain peanut oil is something that CUSD Director of Food Services Karen Wright suggests, as she makes it a habitual practice to examine the labels on the products that she purchases for schools throughout the district.

“Just look at the labels,” Ms. Wright said. “Looking at the labels, you can see if a product has something like peanut oil or not.”

Ms. Wright is a supporter of the new peanut-free ruling by CUSD and has made adjustments in the past to the district’s food offerings. She eliminated all the foods that included trans fats a few years ago and also has provided alternatives for vegetarians and vegans.

During Ms. Wright’s first year within CUSD 16 years ago, the food services director can only recall one instance where a student had peanut allergies, versus the multiple cases presently. While some of the more popular speculations on the growing allergy problem have focused on the growing methods and specific proteins of the peanuts, Ms. Wright believes that other factors are possibly involved.

“A lot of kids have allergies today they never had before and people have a lot of diseases today that they never had before,” she said. “When I first came to California, there weren’t as many people as there are today. We have more people here and more people that are coming here from other places.”

**Word from Keck**

Molly Schmid, who is a professor, entrepreneur-in-residence and director of research at Keck Graduate Institute, also takes into account the number of factors that are involved in peanut allergies but also speculates that the answer could be in the peanut itself.

“All of the scientific reports I’ve read say that cases of peanut allergies are increasing. But the question as to why it is increasing is still open,” Ms. Schmid said. “Peanuts have lots of proteins and right now the challenge may be to identify the individual proteins that may be causing the allergies. So if those particular proteins are destroyed, then the peanut may become non-allergenic. So in terms of solutions, one option could be to change the peanut itself. Another option would be, that if the cause of it was tied to the growing process, to find a way to grow the peanuts differently.”

Ms. Schmid believes that if the number of cases continue to grow and the peanut becomes the subject that is more closely examined, it may cause the peanut industry to start considering alternatives.
“The one to two-percent of people who are allergic to peanuts is a relatively large number,” she said. “Peanuts are a $1 billion industry. The use of peanuts has increased a lot over the years. Peanuts are very prevalent and are much more prominent than they were before. Yet if the movement towards looking at the peanut continues, it may put pressure on the industry to recognize what’s happening.”

Parents be watchful

While CUSD will not ban students from bringing lunches to school that contain peanut butter sandwiches or other peanut-products, the schools will inform parents about the growing problem and let them decide in how they want to proceed. Yet for the Claremont students who receive snacks and lunch at school, the word “peanut” will no longer be included in the district food’s vocabulary.

“School sites are going to send information out to parents to let them know about it and to encourage them to be considerate of the students who have peanut allergies,” Mr. Bateman said.

Mr. Miya feels it is crucial for parents to encourage their children who have peanut allergies and to reinforce that having the condition doesn’t have to be a negative consideration.

“I would tell parents whose children have this condition to let their children know that they’re still normal but they have to eat a little bit differently,” he said.”

—Landus Rigsby