



## Senate Bill 234

### Testimony before the House Public Health Policy Committee

December 4, 2024

Chairman Mathews, Vice Chairman Stewart, Ranking Member Liston, and members of the House Public Health Policy Committee, I am Benjamin Robison, Wood County Health Commissioner and President of the Association of Ohio Health Commissioners (AOHC). I am pleased to provide written testimony in support of Senate Bill 234, which proposes the designation of May as Food Allergy Awareness Month in Ohio.

#### Introduction

Millions of Americans live with food allergies, a serious condition where the body mistakes a food as harmful. The USDA reports that food allergies affect 6% of adults and an estimated 8% of children in the United States. That equals 1 in 13 children, or about 2 students per classroom. While food allergies can affect anyone, studies show:

- They are more common in children, though some people develop them as adults.
- Black, Non-Hispanic adults and children have a higher prevalence of food allergies compared to other ethnicities.
- Individuals with eczema or asthma—or those who have a family history of these conditions—are at greater risk of developing food allergies.

#### What are Food Allergies?

Food allergies occur when the immune system overreacts to a specific food protein. This reaction can trigger a range of symptoms, from mild discomfort to life-threatening anaphylaxis. Unlike food intolerance, which causes digestive issues but no immune response, food allergies can be very serious.

#### Common Food Allergies

Over 160 foods can cause allergies, but nine (9) account for the vast majority of reactions:

1. Milk
2. Egg
3. Peanuts
4. Tree nuts (almonds, walnuts, cashews)
5. Fish
6. Shellfish (shrimp, lobster, crab)
7. Soy
8. Wheat
9. Sesame (newly recognized as a major allergen)

At the time the first-eight, major allergens were identified, they accounted for 90 percent of food allergies and serious allergic reactions in the U.S. This percentage does not account for the serious allergic reactions from sesame, which was identified in January 2023 as the 9th major food allergen recognized by the United States.

### **Symptoms of Food Allergies**

Symptoms can appear within minutes of exposure and range from mild to severe, affecting numerous parts of the body:

- **Mild symptoms can include:**
  - Gut: mild nausea or discomfort (stomach pain, abdominal cramping)
  - Mouth: itchy; odd taste; slight, dry cough
  - Nose: itchy, runny nose; sneezing; congestion
  - Skin: a few hives (reddish, swollen, itchy areas on the skin), mild itch (sometimes in the ear canal)
- **Severe symptoms can include:**
  - Body: lightheadedness, fainting or loss of consciousness, anaphylaxis
  - Gut: repetitive vomiting or severe diarrhea
  - Heart: pale, turning blue, faint, weak or “thready” pulse, dizziness, chest pain, drop in blood pressure
  - Lung: shortness of breath, wheezing, repetitive cough, difficulty breathing
  - Mouth: significant swelling of the tongue or lips
  - Psychological: feeling something bad is about to happen, sense of impending doom, anxiety, confusion, feeling weak
  - Skin: many hives over the body, widespread redness, eczema
  - Throat: tight, hoarse, trouble swallowing or breathing, swelling

Allergic reactions may not be immediately recognized, especially in children, as children may not know how to describe their symptoms. They may say things like:

- *This food is too spicy.*
- *My tongue/mouth is hot.*
- *It feels like something is poking my tongue.*
- *My tongue feels like there is hair on it.*
- *There’s something stuck in my throat.*
- *My lips feel tight.*
- *It feels like there are bugs in there. (to describe itchy ears)*

In some cases, they may not communicate their experiences at all, instead putting their hands in their mouths, pulling or scratching at their tongues, or slurring their words. Sometimes, their voices could become hoarse or squeaky.

Recognizing allergic reactions quickly is essential to responding in time to prevent the most significant outcomes.

### **Living with Food Allergies**

The only way to avoid reactions from food allergies is to avoid trigger foods. This can be challenging, as allergens may be hidden ingredients or come into contact with other food during preparation.

If you are working to limit the impact of food allergies, you can take the following steps:

- **Read food labels carefully:** Look for the "Big 9" allergens listed on the label.
- **Ask questions:** When eating out, inform restaurants about your allergies and inquire about ingredients and preparation methods.
- **Carry an epinephrine auto-injector:** This medication can be life-saving in case of a severe reaction.
- **Educate others:** Inform family, friends, schools, and workplaces about your allergies and how to respond to a reaction.

Engaging a registered dietitian (RDN) can help you develop a safe eating plan that meets your nutritional needs while avoiding allergens. They can also guide you on how to read food labels and find hidden allergens.

### **Conclusion**

Food allergies require careful management, but with knowledge and vigilance, you can live a safe and healthy life. Increasing awareness allows people to better understand the importance of food allergies and take steps to keep themselves and their loved ones safe. With education and some key strategies, we can minimize risks from food allergies and help everyone to enjoy a variety of delicious foods.

On behalf of its 111 local health district members, AOHC supports the designation of Food Allergy Awareness Month in Ohio and asks this committee to favorably vote for Senate Bill 234.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony. I am happy to answer any questions you make have.

### **Contact Information:**

Benjamin Robison  
brobison@woodcountyohio.gov  
419-308-1368