



Kyle Topping :

Nuts

I have had only one reaction to peanuts in my life, it is my first memory at the age of 1. 27 years later I still have to double check everything every time I eat. I have to do this so that I don't die.

MAY CONTAIN:

Living with food allergies.



Eggs - Milk - Soy - Peanuts - Tree nuts
Beans - Peas - Mango - Sunflower
Seafood

I always have my guard up. One mistake can be the difference between life and death.



- BANANAS
- ALMONDS
- AVOCADO

- ALCOHOL
- NATURE (MOSTLY GRASS TREES)

"WE ARE A PRODUCT OF PAST CHOICES ; MASSIVE CHANGES TO AGRICULTURE."

<CHRISSEY POITRAS>



MILK • CHEESE • COCOA • FISH • KIWİ

MEALS BECOME AN ORDEAL THAT WE DONT ALWAYS HAVE TIME FOR.

Photos and Story by Dayna Lefebvre

Living with a food allergy, intolerance or sensitivity can be a stressful challenge, and it's a challenge that over 7% of Canadians deal with every day; and that number is rising, according to a 2012 study published by the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology.

Food allergies can range from mild to severe. The worst kind of reaction is an anaphylactic reaction, which can cause swelling of the throat and, in severe cases, death. Every three minutes someone in North America is sent to the emergency room because of a food related reaction.

But the effects of food sensitivities run deeper than just the physical side of having a reaction.

Many individuals with serious food allergies must live a cautious life due to cross contamination issues. Something as simple as grabbing a coffee with friends or a romantic dinner date can become impossible, which results in social and emotional consequences.

"It's the worst on a social level, people think you're crazy," says Chrissy Poitras, 29, who is an artist and teacher with a serious alcohol allergy. "Most of the time for me when I go out, I say 'no, I don't drink,' then I have to go on the whole spiel and people press the issue. They can't let it go. I think it freaks people out."

Brandon Whaley, 22, cannot eat any dairy or cocoa because of ulcerative colitis, says it's not something he enjoys discussing in a public setting.

"Something as simple as an offer of food can make things awkward," he says. "There's just so many limitations that you have to deal with that most people don't even think of."

The trauma of having a severe, hospitalizing reaction can stay with an individual for years, shaping who they are as a person and governing how they react to the world.

"I can describe the room I was in," says Kyle Topping, 29, who is an artist and teacher. Topping has an anaphylactic allergy to nuts, and has had a reaction to peanut butter occurring when he was just one year old. "That's my first known reaction, and my first memory."

Travis Whaley, 21, has severe anaphylactic allergies including dairy, soy, beans, peas, tree nuts, peanuts, sunflower and seeds. "It's caused a lot of damage," Whaley says. "I got a lot of 'you can't have this, oh man, your life sucks, I'd just kill myself if I were you.'"

On a social level, being 'the kid with allergies' can be scarring, especially in elementary school where bullying is such an issue.

"I had to eat lunch in the library because in the classroom there were always people eating peanut butter," Topping explains. "That started a long chain of social ostracization for me. Like 'you're the kid who eats in the library with your two friends, nerd.' That sucked."

Travis Whaley recalls similar situations from his childhood.

"I desperately wanted to be normal and people to see me as normal," says Whaley. "All through public school I was the allergy kid. I purposely went to [a different high school] to start my life over again. I didn't want to be branded; I didn't want anyone to know. Because being branded by your most negative feature sucks."

"There's positive. I'm so thankful for life... but I'm also hateful," continues Whaley. "I'm a very guarded person because of it. One little mess up could be the end of my life. So, yeah, the shields are up."

Whaley has had nearly a dozen life threatening hospitalizations between his severe asthma and allergies. "I've been very susceptible to panic attacks, stress level has sky rocketed," Whaley explains. "As I got older, you almost feel like you're safe. But then the violent reaction flipped my life around."

Other than his first reaction, Topping hasn't had any. "I'm really happy about that but it's a catch 22 in the sense that I'm more nervous about it, because I don't know what anaphylactic shock is like anymore," he explains. "In my brain, sometimes I think I'm just going to maybe just explode if I eat peanuts. I have no life experience for what it would be like. That's scary."

One study suggests that children and adults with food allergies are more likely to suffer from anxiety, panic attacks and depression.

However, there is little information published about the social and psychological effects of growing up with a food allergy or intolerance.

"I talk to doctors about it and they say I'm lying," says Poitras about her alcohol allergy. "They refuse to listen to me. So I just don't bother."

The reason for the increase in food allergies is still unknown.

- Top to bottom
- Kyle Topping, 27, from Picton, has been allergic to nuts his entire life and it has had a significant impact on his personality.
 - Travis Whaley, 21, from Trenton, has had anaphylactic allergies to several things for all of his life. He spent most of his childhood and early teens in the hospital between his allergies and asthma.
 - Chrissy Poitras, 29, from Picton, has had her social life be affected by her alcohol allergy.
 - Brandon Whaley, 22, from Trenton, has ulcerative colitis which restricts his diet. He was diagnosed in his early teens.
 - Rita DeMelo, 50, has had a gluten intolerance for years.



- Gluten
- Cow's Milk
- Eggs

'I am not on a diet. These are serious health issues.'