

ASK AN EXPERT

KYLE DINE, FOOD ALLERGY EDUCATOR

What do kids and families need to know about food allergies?

Food allergy educator Kyle Dine opened his musical presentation at Monroe School Tuesday by asking who among the dozens of elementary students gathered knew someone with a food allergy.

Virtually every hand went up.

That's a dramatic change from just a couple decades ago, when Dine was a boy in Canada with multiple restrictions on his diet.

"For me there was no one I knew with allergies," he said, noting that many dismissed his mother's assertions as pretext for an overly picky eater. "It was tough because you're not as comfortable with the condition when you don't have that type of support from people around you."

Today, Dine travels all over North America encouraging children who have allergies and teaching their classmates ways to help prevent medical emergencies.

"I'm on a three-month tour," he

said of growing demand for his show. "A lot of schools are looking to address this issue."

The most common food allergies are to dairy, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, soy and wheat. Dine is allergic to all but dairy, soy and wheat. He also cannot eat mustard.

"If somebody ever tells you their food allergies," Dine told students, "it is so important to pay attention, to listen, and try to remember what your friends and your classmates are allergic to because you can help them stay safe."

Many schools have instituted peanut-free zones in lunch period, and sharing or swapping meals is highly discouraged.

Less obvious, Dine said, is the importance of washing one's hands after eating to prevent the transfer of allergens through door handles or a high-five.

Through a series of catchy songs and help from his companion puppets, Dine kept his young audience engaged. He used volunteers to cover symptoms of an allergic reaction, such as hives, stomach cramps or swollen lips.

"If you ever saw somebody feeling strange, feeling funny at school, who would you tell?" he

asked the kids.

"Our teacher!" they shouted in unison. At home?

"Mom and Dad!"

Dine showed them the EpiPen he always carries on his belt and the MedicAlert bracelet that lists his allergies in case he needs treatment.

His closing song, "Food Allergies Rock," is designed to help dispel the stigma that may still be associated with the condition.

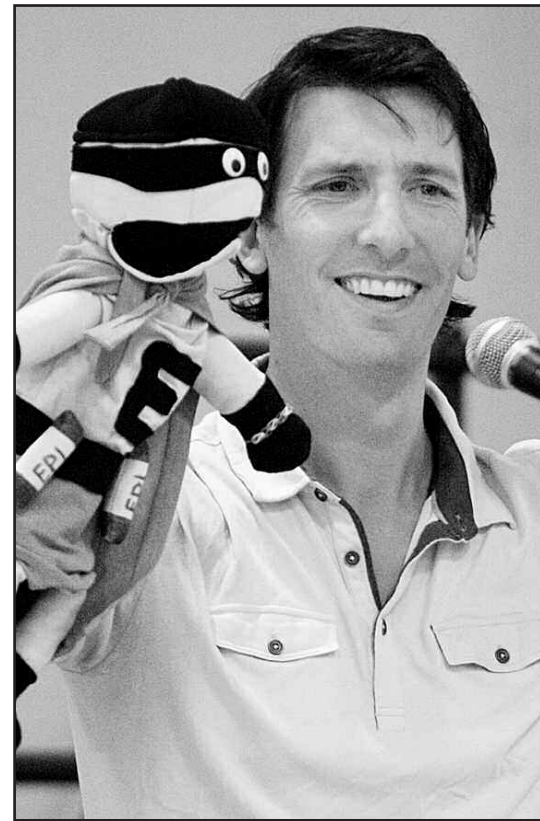
Dine said having food allergies is no longer something he gripes about but rather appreciates the broader perspective it affords him.

"I feel very fortunate to have food allergies compared to many other conditions," he said. "I'm very fortunate I have a condition that can be managed."

Through his program, he hopes to raise awareness in children and, by extension, their families, that food allergies are not scary. They're just a fact of life like anything else.

"For them to say out loud, 'I need to wash my hands after I eat peanut butter,' that's what I want them to do during the assembly," he said. "It's some very simple things, but they all really add up."

— by Ken Knutson



Presenter Kyle Dine enlists his puppets, Epi-Man and Epi-Man Jr., to help teach Monroe School students about food allergies during an assembly Tuesday. Dine, who has multiple food allergies himself, is never without his EpiPen, seen here on his belt. (Jim Slonoff photo)



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