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Man's death a stark reminder of food allergy risks

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SEATTLE -- Daniel Sargent was at Magnuson Park on Sunday, celebrating a friend's 30th birthday.

About 90 seconds after taking a bite out of a chocolate chip cookie, he collapsed.

By chance, an Everett pulmonologist, a nurse and a medic were attending the party. They administered CPR until aid crews arrived.

Sargent, 30, of Everett, was rushed to Harborview Medical Center. Medical staff battled for two days to help him overcome the complications of anaphylactic shock, an extreme allergic reaction that blocked his breathing and deprived his brain of oxygen.

Doctors tried cooling his body for 24 hours and heavily sedating him, in the hope that his body could rest and recover.

Monday afternoon, his blood pressure skyrocketed and his heart rate dropped. Tuesday evening, two neurologists pronounced Sargent brain dead.

All this, his family said, from taking one bite out of a homemade chocolate chip cookie, one that had just enough peanut butter to trigger his extreme allergic reaction.

Sargent, a Herald employee, was one of about 300* people who die each year nationally from anaphylactic shock, which can be triggered by common foods such as peanuts, shellfish and eggs, said Angel Waldron, a spokeswoman for the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

Peanuts are the most common source of fatal allergic reactions, said Dr. Paul McBride, an allergist at The Everett Clinic.

"Your blood pressure can go to zero while your airways swell closed," he said. "And you have literally less than a minute to deal with it before people pass out. That's why immediate treatment is so crucial."

Otherwise, he said, death can occur within seconds.

Because peanuts are both inexpensive and good sources of protein, they're used as ingredients in many different products, including cookies, candies and pastries.

"It's a lot of products that people just put them in," McBride said.

"The people that are allergic are the ones that have to be vigilant. No one else will pay attention for them."

Sargent's family said they hope their loss is a reminder of how important it is to label food containing common allergens, even at picnics and other community events.

"I don't want another parent to have to go through this," said David Sargent, Daniel's father. "It's been proven that peanuts can drop you quick."

"You may be the world's greatest cook, but if it has peanuts in it, please label it. It can kill somebody."

Daniel Sargent, who graduated from Snohomish High School in 1996, worked at The Herald as a sports writer,

covering soccer and high school sports. He also worked as a medical assistant for Skagit Valley Medical Center in Mount Vernon.

A memorial service is planned for later this month, his sister, Penny Sargent said.

His life-long interest in soccer began at age 5 when he first began playing the sport.

He began coaching for the Snohomish County Youth Soccer Club when he was 18 and continued his volunteer work for more than a decade.

He also participated with an indoor soccer organization in Snohomish as a coach, player and referee, his sister said.

The family first learned of his severe peanut allergy when he was three months old. A little peanut oil on his skin caused a rash and blisters, his father said.

And when he was a little older, a small piece of chocolate candy containing peanut butter caused blistering in his month.

"We worked to keep peanut butter and peanut oils away from him," his dad said.

The family always kept an EpiPen at the house, an emergency shot of adrenaline that can be injected in an instant to counteract severe allergic reactions.

As an adult, his son decided not to carry one with him, he said, instead trying to be vigilant about what he was eating and having an over-the-counter allergy medicine close at hand.

"This time, it just came too fast, too quick, and too deadly," his dad said.

Daniel Sargent had listed his desire to be an organ donor on his driver's license. On Friday, his heart was used in transplant surgery at the University of Washington, his sister said. His liver, kidneys and corneas also will be donated.

"Daniel was a very caring person," she said. "Giving the gift of life to other people is what he wanted to do."

Food dangers

Foods that commonly cause anaphylaxis, a life-threatening allergic reaction in children, include: eggs, peanuts, wheat and milk. In adults, it's shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts and other legumes.

Stings from bees, wasps, yellowjackets, and hornets also can cause anaphylaxis.

Source: Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

For more information, check the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America's Web site at www.aafa.org and click on the food allergies link.

***Correction, July 7, 2008:** This article originally misstated the number of annual deaths from anaphylactic shock.

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