

Living and Traveling with Food Allergies in Singapore and Beyond – Can Lah!

By Bill Poorman



When the opportunity came for our family to move to Singapore three years ago, we were excited, of course. It would be our first time living abroad. But we had one big concern that could have derailed the whole plan: Would our son – who has multiple, severe food allergies and other environmental allergies – be safe? We had to figure out if he would be able to get proper medical care and if we could find the foods he needs and likes to eat.

The answer, of course – since I'm writing this article – is yes. And with a little research and preparation, if a member of your family has food allergies or another allergic condition, you should be safe and satisfied, too.

With regard to medical care and medical supplies, in Singapore, you're covered. We have been able to get every medicine that we've needed. That includes Epipens and asthma inhalers. And the medical care that we've received regarding his allergies is just like what we had in the US. Our son has been through a couple of rounds of annual allergy testing, and he even has gone through one food challenge. The food challenge took place at National University Hospital, in a dedicated ward, staffed by a friendly and attentive set of nurses.

As for food, we have found just about everything we need and want in Singapore. Many groceries, like Cold Storage and Jason's, cater to western tastes and carry a variety of American brands, so you should be able to find familiar products. If you can't find what you are looking for there, several natural goods stores stock brands designed for people with food allergies or intolerances. Since we live in Orchard area, we frequent SuperNature at the Forum, Brown Rice Paradise at Tanglin Mall, and Four Seasons Organic Market at Great World City. Still, there are some products that you likely won't be able to find at any of those places. That's where mail order comes in. We've had good luck with the online retailers *iHerb* and *Amazon*.

If you live with food allergies, you are likely familiar with reading product labels to search for allergens and allergy warnings. The labeling in Singapore is quite good, and the imported products you're likely to use come from countries with helpful labeling requirements. Also, Singapore re-labels ingredients into English if they don't arrive that way. One word of caution here, though: Make sure to always read the ingredients labels on familiar products. We have found some that are perfectly safe in the US, but have dangerous ingredients for our son here. For example, Oreos in the US contain no milk. But the Oreos sold here are manufactured on a line that also handles cow milk. Also, many local brands of essential items, like wheat flour or baking powder, contain milk.

So far, with my focus on groceries, I've been assuming that you make all of your food at home. Given the severity of our son's food allergies, that's what we've always done. But of course, Singapore is legend for its hawker centers and restaurants, so you're likely to want to try a few. Seeing as we carry all of his food from home, we've never tried to engage with food vendors or restaurant staff to have dishes altered in any way. You could still try this, I believe. Many servers in Singapore are aware of food allergies and would know what you're trying to communicate. I know this because we always show up at restaurants with lunch bags, and when we explain that we are bringing in outside food because of food allergies, we've never been questioned.

This understanding of food allergies extends to the schools in Singapore, as well. Our children attend Singapore American School. The administration, teaching and nursing staff have all been understanding of and attentive to our son's needs.

Now, maybe after you've been in Singapore for a bit, you might join the many other expats who have hired a live-in helper. Often these helpers cook meals. That can add another tricky dimension to living with food allergies. For example, we had to be very cautious during the interview process. We had to make sure she had a solid grasp of English because that's the language of our recipes. We also needed to make sure she understood the dangers of food allergies, how to properly handle food to avoid cross-contamination, how to follow modified recipes, and what to do in case of a reaction. Once all of the risks and details were explained, we had a couple of candidates turn us down. But in the end, we found a wonderful helper who has benefitted us immensely during our time in Singapore.

So, when it comes to living with food allergies and environmental allergies in Singapore, you should be well covered in terms of safety, medical care, and with additional help. However, when you travel around the Asia-Pacific region, it could be very different.

Because you're reading this, it's likely that you made it through the plane ride over without incident. But there are many more flights to come, since getting to many sights in the region require air travel. As people who live with food and environmental allergies know well, plane rides can be very stressful. First, you have to pack food or make special arrangements for allergen-free meals with the airline. But even then, you might not be safe. For example, just this July, a three-year-old suffered a life-threatening allergic reaction on a flight from Singapore to Melbourne after the passengers around him started opening packages of peanuts that had been served as a snack. Luckily, he was able to recover thanks to the medicine his parents had with them, but people with food allergies all live in fear of similar incidents. Singapore Airlines says it is reviewing its policies regarding having peanuts on flights.

For our family's part, we travel with eight Epipens and bottles of antihistamines on flights. Since the Epipens are in our carry-on luggage, they always get a second look from security. One time security in Hong Kong took the time to fill out special forms, but we've never been barred from taking the medicines with us on a flight. This is true for food, as well. We often carry hot food, like rice, in metal containers for our son. While security always flags the containers and has us open them, we've never been stopped from carrying them on. Every once in a while we have had to show a doctor's note that we carry with us explaining our son's food allergies and why he needs the medicines and food. This tends to smooth things over right away.

Now, just because you get the food on the plane, that doesn't necessarily mean you can get the food into the country to which you're traveling. Australia and New Zealand, for example, have very strict laws regarding food and agricultural imports in order to protect their environments. One time while traveling to Australia, we indicated on our immigration form that we had food with us. We later got pulled aside and, frankly, scolded for trying to bring the food in. It was all thrown out. We learned our lesson. Even so, when my wife later traveled to Australia for business, she was pulled aside again, even though she didn't have food with her. We suspect we were put on a watch list. But when traveling around Asia, we haven't had this kind of scrutiny. For example, we've had no problem bringing food into China or Thailand. No matter where you travel, import

controls only seem to apply to fresh and cooked foods. We always bring along some packaged goods from Singapore or the US. These don't seem to be a problem.

Once you are off the plane and in a different country, you likely have to do some grocery shopping and cooking. It's easy to find retailers in places like Australia and New Zealand, but often the brands are unfamiliar, so you can't count on finding trusted names. However, the food labeling laws are good, so you should be able to find substitutes. When traveling to other, less western countries, we count on a hired guide to help us find groceries for fresh meat and produce. In those countries, we tend to bring all of our own packaged and dry goods, which again, doesn't seem to be a problem. For cooking, we book serviced apartments or villas. These tend to be easy to find, either online or through a travel agent, but they will cost more than a regular hotel room. As I mentioned above, we never have restaurants prepare our son's food, so we don't have experience working with chefs and wait staff in other countries. We've always taken the perspective that the last thing we want on vacation is an allergic reaction, so we play it as safe as possible.

Another way we play it safe is by limiting how exotic our destinations are. We've heard wonderful stories from friends of the remote and interesting places that the Asia-Pacific region has to offer. But early on in our stay in Singapore, we ruled those places out. Getting food would be hard enough, but even worse, if there was an allergic reaction, we'd be unsure of the speed or quality of the medical care. Don't get me wrong; we still feel like we've had some wonderful adventures that have generated lifelong memories. We just haven't pushed the envelope.

In the end, as with all things regarding food and environmental allergies, it depends on how severe the condition is and how risk averse you are. But even if you're a little uptight like we are, you should have a safe and enjoyable time in Singapore and Asia, without taking too many chances.

Good luck!

Bill Poorman is a writer living in Singapore who may someday travel to the remote rice paddies of Yunnan Province or the chilly summit of Mt. Kinabalu, but that day is not today.

