

Take all Food Allergies Seriously

Belinda Vaca

Mother of Sergio Lopez

Advocate for Food Allergies



I. Prevention

- Avoid
Milk, Eggs, Fish (e.g., bass, flounder, cod), **Crustacean shellfish** (e.g., crab, lobster, shrimp), **Tree nuts** (e.g., almonds, walnuts, pecans), **Peanuts, Wheat, Soybeans. Sesame**
- Communicate
- Teach

II. Preparedness

- Recognize Anaphylaxis
- Give Epinephrine
- Activate Emergency Response

III. Care for anyone with Food Allergies

- Comprehend Food Allergy Basics
- Avoid the Allergen
- Recognize a Reaction
- Enact Emergency Plan

IV. Severe Symptoms

- Lung
- Heart
- Throat
- Mouth
- Skin
- Gut
- Other

V. Mild Symptoms

- Nose
- Mouth
- Skin
- Gut

VI. Differences of Food Allergies and Food Intolerances

- Food Intolerance does not affect immune system
- Both affect effect digestive system



A Mom's Mission
"He was my whole life," says Vaca (left, at the Texas capitol this April, and, right, with Lopez, her only child, in 2014).

Texas Mom Belinda Vaca

'No One Should Die From Food Allergies'

AFTER HER SON DIED FROM EATING A TAKEOUT TACO THAT CONTAINED PEANUT BUTTER, SHE FOUGHT FOR A LAW TO KEEP OTHERS SAFE

Even as a child, Sergio Lopez took his allergy to peanuts seriously. In school, where he was known as "the peanut boy," he'd remind his teachers to keep nuts out of the classroom. He carried hand wipes everywhere and avoided public toilets for fear of contamination. So in June of 2014, when the 24-year-old ordered a vegetarian taco for lunch at a restaurant in McAllen, Texas, he was typically cautious, asking three times whether the dish contained peanuts. No, he was told, only spices. But less than 12 hours later, Lopez was dead of anaphylaxis: The taco had been made with a sauce containing peanut butter. Confronted later, the restaurant owner said Lopez asked about peanuts—but not peanut butter. "This shouldn't happen," his mother, Belinda Vaca, thought. "There should be a law."

Vaca, 64, a retired IT specialist, spent the next nine years lobbying for just that. In May the Texas state legislature passed the Sergio Lopez Food

Allergy Awareness Act. "Belinda showed up to the Capitol every legislative session to fight for this," says state Rep. Philip Cortez, who authored the bill. "Sergio's death could have been prevented. Because of Belinda, other mothers and fathers may not lose their child."

The law, which goes into effect Sept. 1, 2023, requires Texas restaurants to post food-allergy awareness signs in employee areas (see box, below) and mandates that allergy awareness be part of food handler certification. "It was ignorance," Vaca says of how the restaurant treated the concerns of her son, a musician (he played guitar, cello and bagpipes) who studied engineering at the University of Texas at Brownsville. "Making people aware is my way of dealing with grief," says Vaca, who didn't sue the restaurant that served her son and is pushing for similar laws in other states. "And it's a way to give love to my son." —EILEEN FINAN WITH REPORTING BY WENDY GROSSMAN KANTOR

'My son is gone, but this is in his honor, to save lives'
—BELINDA VACA

FOOD ALLERGIES

It's a Matter of Life or Death
Requires an allergy awareness sign in employee areas.
New Food Handler Certification Requirements
New Food Allergy Awareness Signage

4 Ways the Law Will Help



Awareness
Texas restaurants will be required to hang a poster like this (left) showing major food allergens.

Education
Posters will explain that exposure to food allergens—even via cross-contamination—can be fatal.

Warning Signs
Common symptoms, which include face or throat swelling and itchy skin, must be listed.

When to Act
The signs will inform employees how to respond in the case of an allergy emergency.

COURTESY BELINDA VACA/2