

EDITORIAL: I thought I was a goner: my celery allergy

I am deathly allergic to celery.

I know this, because I almost died after eating it about four years ago.

I had taken a snack of celery sticks and cream cheese to work with me ? having always loved celery, a staple in my refrigerator up until that point ? which I ate before leaving work around 5 p.m.

At that point in my life I was in the habit of exercising daily and when I got home, fueled by my afternoon snack, I slipped into my workout gear and put a DVD into the player.

Soon after my workout began, all I could smell was the overwhelming aroma of celery. The smell was radiating through my skin like I had bathed in it. Especially from my hands.

My partner at the time arrived home from work to find me working out. I whirled around to say hello, and he immediately looked panicked.

?What's wrong with your lips?? he asked.

?What do you mean,? I said, heading to the mirror to check out my face.

I was shocked with what I saw. My lips looked like I had been stung by a hundred bees.

Things progressed quickly from there.

I was itchy all over my face, neck and chest. Quarter-sized hives started to pop out all over my cheeks and my throat started to close.

I knew I was in trouble and I needed to get to the hospital stat.

I threw a hoodie on over my sweaty workout clothes and got into the car. My boyfriend, who was expected to be at a hockey game, dropped everything to get me medical attention.

On the way to the hospital, which was 15 minutes away, my situation started to decline. I had about a straw?width of space left in my throat and as a result, was having difficulty breathing.

We pulled into a local grocery store, with a pharmacy section, to get liquid Benadryl.

With a tiny voice, I said, ?Don't wait in line. Throw money on the counter and get back as fast as you can?.

I had never seen someone run that fast before, and he was back in the car with the medication before I knew it. I swallowed the whole bottle (I'm sure that I wasn't following label directions, nor do I recommend that). This turned out to be the thing that saved my life, as I would find out later.

I arrived at Stephenson Memorial Hospital in Alliston minutes later.

I approached the Emergency Room nurse, who was looking down at her paperwork.

?I'm having an allergic reaction,? I said, croaking.

She looked up at me and I could see her face change immediately. I guess I still looked horrible.

"Oh my God, you sure are," she said, taking me into an examination room.

I was put on an IV drip (more Benadryl) and the doctor recommended I get an adrenaline shot as well.

At this point, thinking I was going to die, I was having a full-scale anxiety attack ? which through later research I discovered goes hand-in-hand with anaphylaxis.

I decline the adrenaline, and instead laid in the bed, convinced I was a goner. To make matters worse, no one believed what was happening to me.

The doctors, nurses and my boyfriend all asked what I had done differently that day. What had I eaten or been in contact with that may have caused this? "Celery," I said.

"Celery is mostly water," they had said. "Couldn't be."

Four hours later, I was discharged with a referral for allergy testing.

It took nearly five months to get an appointment in Newmarket, and when the day finally arrived, I was in for a treat.

Because food allergies were in question, they had to run the full testing series ? that meant that allergens were scratched into my entire back while they waited for a response. Celery was one of the items they tested for. I was scared to even hear the word.

Very shortly after the celery test was done, the site erupted into a welt the size of a Toonie. It itched like crazy. The allergist came in to view the results, and was even shocked himself.

"You've had a five-time reaction to celery," he informed. Adding, "Strange?"

A five time reaction is anaphylaxis. To put this in perspective for you, I had a two time reaction to ragweed ? which keeps me sniffing (even on an extra-strength daily antihistamine) throughout the month of August.

I was written a prescription for an EpiPen and sent on my way.

EpiPens are \$100 and have a short shelf life ? which sucks. They don't even guarantee to save you life, but instead will buy you time to get to a hospital.

Along side my EpiPen, I also carry a bottle of liquid Benadryl with me everywhere I go. I hope I never need it, but it's there in case I do. I also have it in case, God forbid, anyone else suddenly discovers they have a new allergy.

As a funny (or not so funny) side note to this: I sent my husband to the store the other day to get stewed tomatoes for a chili I was making. He came home with a tomato blend, specific for chili. I dumped both cans into the huge pot, before thinking to read the label ? a habit I've gotten very used to. Sure enough, it contained celery. Without knowing it, I would have exposed myself to another reaction if I had of eaten any. Which I didn't. We joke now, that he tried to kill me... which he adamantly denies... hmmm...

Wikipedia.org has this to say about celery allergies: Celery is among a small group of foods (headed by peanuts) that appear to provoke the most severe allergic reactions; for people with celery allergy, exposure can cause potentially fatal anaphylactic shock. The allergen does not appear to be destroyed at cooking temperatures. Celery root ? commonly eaten as celeriac, or put into drinks ? is known to contain more allergen than the stalk. Seeds contain the highest levels of allergen content. Exercise-induced anaphylaxis may be exacerbated. An allergic reaction also may be triggered by eating foods that have been processed with machines that have

previously processed celery, making avoiding such foods difficult. In contrast with peanut allergy being most prevalent in the US, celery allergy is most prevalent in Central Europe. In the European Union, foods that contain or may contain celery, even in trace amounts, must be clearly marked as such.

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