

# 'A slice of pizza could

Annette Ison, 33, from Romford, Essex, loved dining out with her family. But one day a sudden anaphylactic shock, from an allergic reaction to fresh herbs, meant that she has to monitor everything she ever eats or she could drop dead at any time



Annette puts on a brave face, but are those herbs a little close for comfort?

**'M**y eyes began to water as the burning sensation ran through my whole body, like a thousand angry pins and needles and I was coughing uncontrollably. My family looked on in horror as I gasped for breath and by the time the ambulance arrived I was deathly blue in the face. It's hard to believe that only minutes before I'd been enjoying my stuffed mushroom starter. I usually had salmon, but had gone for something a bit different for a change – little did I know it'd change my life forever.

I'd been enjoying a lovely meal at a new gastropub in the countryside, just outside the town we lived in. Myself, my husband Geoff, my daughters Ruby, nine and Felicity, seven, were all dining out with my parents and my sister and her family, celebrating my dad's birthday. I'd eaten a few mouthfuls and began to tell my mum how delicious it was when I started to cough uncontrollably. "Will you stop that, it's so annoying," my husband joked, so I nipped outside to get a little fresh air.

As soon as I was outside I began to feel worse. I was still coughing and began struggling for breath. My hands and feet were stinging, my throat was swollen and my whole body was lobster red and itching. My mum came out and was horrified to find me in such a mess. She ran to get Geoff and by the time he came out I could barely breathe, let alone speak. Panicked, he called an ambulance. The kids were beside themselves too: "Are you okay Mummy?" Ruby cried but couldn't breathe to speak to reassure them. My face had swollen up to twice its normal size, I thought I wasn't going to make it through the night.

Thankfully the ambulance arrived in minutes. The paramedics realised that I was having an allergic reaction and gave me injections of adrenaline, antihistamine and steroids, which all worked to combat the attack. Soon it calmed and I could breathe again but I came out in hives and blotches. They explained this is a completely normal response, as the body begins to recover.

I was taken to hospital under observation



# kill me'

for a few hours before being allowed home and I had to take antihistamines every day for the next week. I was also advised to find out what was in the dish that had caused my reaction and to visit my GP to find out more about my allergy.

I contacted the restaurant for the ingredients list and was told that it was a simple dish of mushroom, parmesan, olive

oil, garlic and herbs. My GP was mystified when I explained – there were no obvious allergy-triggering foods like nuts or eggs. He suggested that it may have been a one-off, but told me to always carry antihistamines in my handbag, in case it ever happened again.

I thought he was right and after a while started to feel more relaxed about eating again. Then eight months later, when Geoff, myself and the kids had all gone to Brighton for the day with the rest of the family, it happened again. We were in an Italian restaurant on the beachfront and I was tucking into a tuna steak in caper sauce.

After a few bites I began to feel the same

terrifying symptoms as before. I started to cough, my chest got really tight and I felt like I was going to faint. I took my

antihistamine straight away and went outside to get some fresh air. I started to feel worse and worse. I got the same stinging feeling in my hands and feet and my heart was racing wildly. Geoff followed straight behind me.

Luckily some St John's Ambulance members were across the road and came over to help. They called a paramedic, who administered injections of steroids and antihistamines to counteract the symptoms and I began to calm down – coming out in the same red blotches and hives as last time. I was taken to a nearby hospital where the doctors decided to refer me to a specialist allergy unit at Guy's and St Thomas' hospital,



Annette's worst fear – fresh herbs.



The whole family helps to monitor what Annette is eating.

London. When I called the restaurant to find out the ingredients in the tuna dish the only one that matched the stuffed mushroom starter was the fresh herbs, so I told the specialist at Guy's hospital and they told me they would test me for a herb allergy.

When I arrived at Guy's they did a skin test on me, pricking my arm and then applying a tiny pinch of herbs to the break in the skin. Sure enough as soon as the fresh herbs were placed on my arm I came out in huge hives. Thankfully the reaction didn't get any worse, as there was such a small amount sprinkled on. The specialist was stunned: "I've never come across anything like it," she said.

"You're the only person in the country with an allergy to fresh herbs!"

I couldn't believe it.

From then on I had to steer clear of them but it's not as easy as it sounds – herbs are in everything. I

was also advised to carry an Epi-pen, which I have to inject into my thigh as soon as I feel an allergic reaction coming on. It contains a shot of adrenaline and antihistamines to combat symptoms if I ever unwittingly eat herbs.

I've now begun to have allergic reactions to dried herbs. It's strange, I can touch them without having to worry but eating them is a whole different matter.

It's so frustrating, I used to be such a foodie but the allergy has taken over my life. I can't eat out any more as nine out of 10 dishes seem to have some sort of herb in them. Even when I've double checked that a dish doesn't contain any herbs half of the time they seem

## WHAT IS AN ALLERGY?

An allergy is caused when the body's immune system has an over-reaction to a particular substance – known as an allergen – which the person has inhaled, swallowed or had contact with. The most common symptoms are sneezing, itchy eyes, swelling, hives and skin rashes, but a more deadly reaction is anaphylaxis – where the sufferer has a severe reaction to a substance and the body goes into shock, leading to a sharp drop in blood pressure, respiratory arrest and even possible heart failure.

## WHAT CAUSES THE SYMPTOMS?

The body's immune system doesn't recognise the substance so it attacks it. As soon as the allergen enters the body antibodies will be made. The antibodies will then react with the substance and powerful chemicals like histamine are released, causing the nearby tissue to become inflamed. The side effects, like sneezing and a runny nose, are the way the body tries to get rid of the allergen and the itching is a reminder to steer clear of it in the future.

## HOW CAN YOU TREAT AN ALLERGY?

Non life-threatening allergies like hay fever can be treated with antihistamines, either over-the-counter or from your GP. For more serious allergies visit your GP who will then refer you to a specialist. Also it's essential to avoid the substance which is causing the reaction.

to come out of the kitchen with a garnish on them, and if that has even touched the rest of the food I'll react violently.

Writers and chefs look at me like I'm mad when I try to explain, so most of the time I cook my own meals at home. Geoff's so scared that I'll accidentally eat something with herbs in, he'll triple check every dish before it passes my mouth. The girls worry about me too. Thankfully Felicity can't remember much about the two severe attacks as she was only four at the time, but Ruby can. She's always telling me to be careful.

It's so hard though as there's herbs in pre-packaged foods, pasta sauces, pizza... everything! It's a good job I love cooking, at least I know the exact recipe, as if the tiniest pinch of herbs is on anything it could kill me.

It's horrible to have to constantly monitor everything I eat, but I really don't have a choice, otherwise one day I might not be so lucky.' ➤



# Ellie's world



Brave Ellie Challis, aged two, lost her limbs to meningitis last year.

Here, her mum Lisa, 33, from Rainham, Essex, updates us on her daughter's recovery...

'We're all very excited this week because Ellie will be getting her new artificial legs in a couple of days. She keeps saying: "New legs soon!" She's had four appointments so far with Dorset Orthopaedic, the private company that's making them. She's become quite a familiar face with the staff!

The new legs will be shorter than the ones Ellie's been using, so it will take a bit of getting used to. But she'll have physiotherapy to help her adjust. I don't think she'll have too many problems though, because Ellie's a very determined little girl. Her teachers at the pre-school she goes to three days a week are overwhelmed with how lively and strong-willed she is. She loves painting as well as sticking and glueing and she loves having a go on the climbing frame. She uses the tops of her elbows to hoist herself up and she loves whizzing down the slide. She's so full of fun and never complains.



ABOVE Ellie enjoys attending pre-school three days a week

Ellie's certainly busy at the moment. As well as pre-school, she goes to First Step, a playgroup for children with special needs, on Mondays and Fridays. She's made loads of friends there and is really enjoying it.

The great thing about First Step is that they hold coffee mornings for the parents, which is a good way to meet other mums and dads with disabled children. Everyone there is so friendly and full of good advice. Although Ellie is the only child there who's suffered with meningitis, it's good to chat to parents who are in a similar position to me and my husband Paul. It's good to know we're not alone.

I'm so lucky to have such a great family. Ellie's twin sister Sophie and my other children, Connor, eight, and Tai'la, seven, are so protective. They make a special effort to play with other disabled children. They say that they hope other children will be just as nice to Ellie.

That's all from me now. Next time I'll be able to show you pictures of Ellie with her new legs!

*Lisa x*

Anyone wishing to make a donation to help Ellie and her family can visit her website at [www.elliemay.info](http://www.elliemay.info)

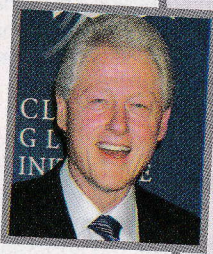
## REAL HEALTH

### Strange but true

People can develop allergies to the weirdest everyday items

#### CHRISTMAS TREES

'Tis the season to be jolly – but not if you've got an allergy to Christmas trees like poor old Bill Clinton. People with this allergy react to terpenes – a mould that grows on the pine needles, which can bring on asthma symptoms, rashes, sneezing fits and streaming eyes. Bah humbug indeed!



Bill pines for an asthma-free Yule.

#### LATEX GLOVES

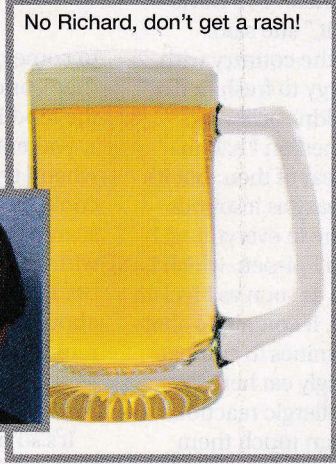
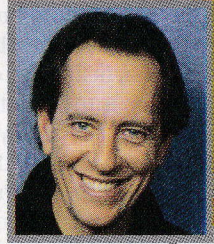
Even the latex in condoms can cause the passion-killing irritation called contact dermatitis. On a serious note, last month 39-year-old Charles Henson, was convicted of attempted murder for trying to kill wife Allison Phelps, by putting a latex glove into her mouth to trigger her allergy to rubber. At the time of going to press he was awaiting his sentence, depending on the findings of psychiatric reports.



Charles Henson has had the finger pointed at him.

#### BOOZE

An allergy to alcohol will probably do your waistline and bank balance a lot of good – but it can be the bane of your life if everyone else around you is merry. Brit actor Richard E Grant's alcohol allergy means that if he touches a drop he'll come out in a rash.



No Richard, don't get a rash!

FEATURE Kirsty Doolan/Lucy Mayhew PHOTOGRAPHS Ben Meadows/istock/Rex

## USEFUL CONTACTS

- Visit [www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org) or call 01322 619898.
- Visit [www.anaphylaxis.org.uk](http://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk) or call 01252 542029.
- Visit [www.allergytest.co.uk](http://www.allergytest.co.uk) or call 01934 842923.