

Nothing to Sneeze At

By Reg P. Wydeven
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My family is absolutely thrilled that summer vacation is here. All I hear about is freedom and being able to stay up late and sleep in and not have any homework. And that's just from my wife. The kids are almost as excited as she is.

This summer our son is again headed up north to Camp Nan-A-Bo-Sho with the YMCA. He's gone the last several years and loves his week of fishing, hiking, swimming and zip-lining. However, as I have mentioned in numerous previous articles, he suffers from severe food allergies.

The first summer he went, we were extremely nervous about him having a reaction. The 'Y' was super accommodating and let us pack him a cooler of his own food that they stored in their walk-in refrigerator. So before each meal, with the help of the camp cook, Sandy, he would grab some food out of the cooler and have his own meal.

Of course, along with the cooler, we packed several EpiPens. These are spring-loaded syringes containing the hormone epinephrine that helps him if he experiences anaphylaxis, or a severe allergic reaction. Mylan, the company that produces EpiPens, came under a lot of heat last year for jacking up the price of the medicine.

The spring-loaded syringe was actually developed by the U.S. military in the 1970s to protect soldiers from chemical warfare. Doctors recognized its potential for delivering epinephrine and the EpiPen was first approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 1987. At the time, it was produced by Meridian Medical Technologies, now a subsidiary of Pfizer.

While Meridian still manufactures the EpiPen, Mylan obtained the rights to sell and market it in 2007, shortly after our son was diagnosed with food allergies and given a prescription for one. At that time, a pair of EpiPens cost about \$94 and generated about \$200 million a year in revenue.

Last year, the device that experts estimate costs less than \$10 to produce, costs over \$600 for a pair, a price hike of over 500%, and sales topped \$1.1 billion. Mylan has cornered about 95% of the market share for epinephrine devices. Adding insult to injury, the devices are only good for a year, so families have to buy new ones each year, or worse yet, more if they ever have to actually use them.

So EpiPens are literally lifesavers and when you see a loved one having an allergic reaction, you would pay \$1 million for one, but \$300 a syringe is still pricey. In response, Mylan released a generic version that costs about half as much. So, if our son goes to camp next summer, it looks like we may have a cheaper alternative.

Earlier this month, the FDA approved Symjepi, which is similar to an EpiPen, but is produced by San Diego-based Adamis Pharmaceuticals Corp. The device, which Adamis says is smaller than an EpiPen and easier to use, will go on sale later this year.

Adamis has not released an exact price because it has not lined up a distributor, but spokesman Mark Flather claims their product will be a "low-cost alternative" to EpiPens. Like EpiPens, Symjepis will be sold in pairs and will also have a "junior version" for kids.

If Symjepis are cheaper but have similar results, I'm sure we'll give it a shot.