

FOOD ALLERGY



A food allergy is when the body's immune system reacts against harmless proteins found in foods. Allergic reactions are often mild, but they can sometimes be very serious. Food allergies are more common in younger children. It is estimated that around 1 in 12 children under the age of three have a food allergy. About 2% of the adult population and 8% of children under the age of three are affected.

An allergic reaction to food involves two components of the immune system. One component is an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE), which circulates through the blood. The other is the mast cell, a specialized cell that is in all tissues of the body but is especially common in areas of the body that are typical sites of allergic reactions: nose, throat, lungs, skin, and gastrointestinal tract. Mast cells release histamine in response to allergens, causing the manifestation of allergy symptoms.

Symptoms of food allergy

The symptoms of a food allergy almost always develop a few seconds to minutes after eating the food. Symptoms includes:

- Tingling or itching in the mouth
- Sneezing or itchy eyes
- Swelling of the face, mouth (angioedema) and other areas of the body
- Difficulty swallowing
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Abdominal pain, vomiting or diarrhoea
- A raised itchy red rash (urticarial or hives)
- Some people may develop a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) which can be life threatening.

Anaphylaxis

The symptoms of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) can be sudden and get worse very quickly. The initial symptoms of anaphylaxis are often the same as those listed above but subsequently can lead to:

- Increased breathing difficulties and wheezing
- A rapid heart rate (tachycardia)
- A sharp and sudden drop in blood pressure – feeling light-headed and confused
- Unconsciousness

Anaphylaxis is a medical emergency. Without fast treatment, it can be life threatening. Call for an ambulance immediately and tell the operator you think the person has anaphylaxis or anaphylactic shock.

Common food allergies

Almost any food can cause an allergic reaction, but there are certain foods that are responsible for most food allergies.

In adults, the most common foods that cause allergic reactions are: shellfish e.g. prawns, crayfish, lobster, and crab; nuts from trees e.g. walnuts, fish, eggs, and peanuts.

In children, common food allergies are eggs, milk, peanuts, and fruits, particularly tomatoes and strawberries. Children sometimes outgrow their allergies but adults usually do not lose theirs. Children are more likely to outgrow allergies to cow's milk, eggs and soya than allergies to peanuts, fish, or shellfish. 90% of all food allergies are caused by the following foods: cow's milk, eggs, wheat, soy, tree nuts, peanuts and shellfish.

It is unknown why some people develop food allergies although they often have other allergic conditions such as asthma, hay fever and eczema.

Non IgE-mediated food allergy

This is another type of allergic reaction. The symptoms of this type of allergy take much longer to develop – sometimes up to several days. The symptoms of non IgE-mediated food allergy may be include:

- Redness and itchiness of skin – although not a raised, itchy red rash (urticarial)
- Heartburn and indigestion
- Stools becoming more frequent or loose
- Constipation
- Redness around anus, rectum or genitals
- In babies – excessive and inconsolable crying (colic) but baby is well fed and does not need a nappy change
- Failure to grow at the expected rate

What is food intolerance?

A food intolerance is not the same as a food allergy. The symptoms of food intolerance tend to come on more slowly, often many hours after eating the problem food. Typical symptoms include bloating stomach cramps and diarrhea. This may be caused by difficulties digesting certain substances, such as lactose. Lactose is found in dairy products like milk, yoghurt and soft cheeses.

The important differences between a food allergy and a food intolerance includes:

- The symptoms of a food intolerance usually occurs several hours after eating the food
- A larger amount of the food needs to be consumed to trigger an intolerance than an allergy
- A food intolerance is never life threatening, unlike an allergy

Food allergy diagnosis

History: The history usually is the most important diagnostic tool. The doctor consults with the patient to determine if the facts are consistent with a food allergy.

Dietary Diary: Sometimes, a history alone cannot determine the diagnosis. The doctor may ask the patient to keep a record of the contents of each meal and whether reactions occurred that are consistent with an allergy.

Elimination Diet: If the patient's history or dietary diary suggests that a specific food allergy is likely, patients may be asked to eliminate suspected allergy causing foods from their diet. The doctor may then request diagnostic tests; such as skin tests and blood tests which can more objectively confirm an allergic response to food.

Treatment for food allergy and food intolerance

There is no medication available to prevent a food allergy. The best way of preventing an allergic reaction is to identify the food that causes the allergy and avoid it.

- In all cases, always read the food carefully as your problem food may be used as an ingredient in other foods
- With lactose intolerance, reduce the amount of dairy food that you eat
- With the autoimmune condition coeliac disease, the immune system mistakes substances found in gluten as a threat to the body and attack them. Symptoms include bloating, diarrhea and weight loss. These patients must avoid gluten for life.
- Antihistamines can help to relieve the symptoms of a mild or moderate allergic reaction
- For severe or life threatening reactions an EpiPen (containing adrenaline, steroids and anti-histamines to have close by) may be prescribed by your doctor
- Give schools and other caretakers instructions that list what foods to avoid and what to do if the food has been eaten

If you think you or your child may have a food allergy, it is very important to seek medical advice from your doctor. Many parents mistakenly assume their child has a food allergy when their symptoms are actually caused by a completely different condition.