
Food Allergies



Food allergies affect 9 million adults in the United States (about 4% of the adult population) and 6 million children (roughly 8% of children in the U.S.). Food allergies account for over 200,000 emergency department visits each year. Although often thought of as a childhood problem, more Americans are now recognizing that food allergies may occur later in life.

What is a food allergy?

A **food allergy** is narrowly defined as an adverse health effect arising from an immune system response that occurs on exposure to a given food or food protein. Note that celiac disease and gluten sensitivity are immune-system related but are not technically food allergies.

Food allergies should not be confused with food intolerances!

A food intolerance is a digestive system response rather than an immune response. Those with an intolerance may be able to eat small amounts of the food without it causing problems. Also, steps can be taken to help prevent a reaction. For example, a person who is intolerant to lactose, a carbohydrate found in milk products, can drink Lactaid milk or take a lactase enzyme pill to help with digestion.

Symptoms of food intolerances include: abdominal pain, cramping, gas, bloating, vomiting, diarrhea and heartburn.

How do food allergies develop?

Food allergies develop when one becomes sensitized to a protein in a food. In response to that protein, the immune system produces food-specific antibodies called immunoglobulin-E (IgE). The next time one comes into contact with that food protein, IgEs recognize it as harmful. In response, cells in the body release histamine and other chemicals into the blood stream, causing the symptoms of a food allergy.

Clinical history

A thorough history of reactions, suspected triggers, amount of the food consumed, as well as cofactors such as alcohol, exercise, medication, speed and extent of symptoms, and reproducibility of reactions, can help your health care provider diagnose an allergy. Clinical history should not be the entire basis for a diagnosis of a food allergy; further tests can help avoid an unnecessary food restriction.

•Food diary:

A diary recording what foods you eat, specific eating habits, and the resulting symptoms (when/if they arise) can help identify the problem.

•Skin test:

A skin prick test involves placing a small amount of suspected antigens beneath your skin. A positive reaction occurs when you develop raised bumps on the skin. However, this is not 100% predictive of an allergy.

•Elimination diet:

Elimination diets involve avoiding or eliminating suspect foods from the diet. Foods are gradually added back one at a time in order to determine which if any, are causing the reaction. Elimination diets are often supervised by a registered dietitian who can identify the foods that may be causing a reaction.

•Oral food challenge:

Oral food challenges are performed in a doctor’s office under medical supervision. It is often considered the gold-standard for food allergy diagnosis. A person is provided with a small amount of the suspected food in addition to a placebo in order to see if a reaction occurs.

•Blood tests:

Blood tests can help measure your immune system’s response to a particular food by checking the amount of IgE or IgG antibodies in your blood stream.

○ IgE tests: IgE tests look at the presence and level of IgE antibodies after exposure to a given food. While this can be helpful in establishing if the reaction is IgE-mediated, this method of testing has not been well validated so positive results should be interpreted with caution.

○ IgG tests: IgG tests look at the presence and level of IgG antibodies after exposure to a given food. However, IgG tests are not definitive and may actually reflect a person’s level of exposure to a given food rather than a reaction to it.

The “big 8” food allergens

These allergens account for 90% of all food allergy reactions

- Milk
- Soy
- Peanut
- Tree nut
- Wheat
- Eggs
- Fish
- Shellfish



For more information:

God’s Love We Deliver, Nutrition Department
212-294-8103 or 800-747-2023
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Symptoms of a food allergy

Symptoms of a food allergy can appear within two minutes to two hours after one comes in contact with the food he/she is allergic to.

Symptoms may include

- Tingling, itching sensation in the mouth
- Face, tongue, or lip swelling
- Swelling/tightening of the throat and vocal chords
- Hives and swelling, eczema
- Abdominal cramps, vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath
- Anaphylaxis ***CAN BE LIFE-THREATENING***
- Drop in blood pressure
- Dizziness, lightheadedness
- Loss of consciousness
- Coughing, wheezing
- Difficulty swallowing

Understanding food labels

If you have food allergies, it is crucial that one reads the entire food label before buying or eating any food product. Any product containing two or more ingredients is required by federal regulations to feature a label stating all the ingredients by their common or usual names. Manufacturers are not required by law to put advisory statements on food. Keep in mind, however, that ingredients used to produce a food can change at any time without the manufacturer changing the label on the product.

While labeling laws do not apply to foods that may have come in contact with major food allergens during processing, some manufacturers do put labels on foods to alert consumers of possible cross-contamination.

Cross-contamination

Occurs when a residue or trace amount of an allergen-causing food becomes incorporated into a food that is not intended to contain it. An example would be using a cutting board to chop nuts and then using that same cutting board to prepare chicken. The residue from the nuts is now on the chicken, cross-contaminating it.

Here are some statements you may see on a food label

“May contain [allergen]”

“Produced in a facility that also produces products containing [allergen]”

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Managing your food allergy

Avoiding a specific food and its associated ingredients is the most common way to manage a food allergy. Consult a registered dietitian or nutritionist to help you identify which foods and food items are safe for you to eat. This includes foods that may have been cross-contaminated with the food allergen.

When it comes to management of food allergies, you are your best advocate, whether it be actively reading food labels or asking questions when dining out.

If you have a severe food allergy, carry your emergency medication with you at all times (e.g. EpiPen) in case of a reaction.

Nutrition and food allergies

Food allergies can cause a person to avoid a particular food or a particular food group. Long-term avoidance can be problematic and may cause a vitamin or mineral deficiency.

When you have a food allergy it is still important to eat a variety of foods, including lean meats, poultry, dried beans and peas, fruits, vegetables, whole and enriched grain products, and healthy oils.

A vitamin or mineral supplement may be beneficial if long-term avoidance of certain foods or food groups is necessary.

Eating out with food allergies

- Carry an index card that lists what you are allergic to, in addition to any associated ingredients, to help identify dishes that may cause a reaction.
- Avoid complex dishes and desserts that have multiple ingredients or sauces.
- Avoid foods that have been cooked in a deep-fat fryer that may have been used to fry foods with allergens.
- At buffets and salad bars, be aware that cross-contamination could happen between utensils or food spilling/splashing into another container.
- Ask questions! To make sure your food is safe, review food ingredients with the wait-staff twice: before you order, and again after you receive your meal and are ready to eat.

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