

Food Allergies

Overview

A Food allergy is a serious and potentially life threatening medical condition. Approximately 32 million Americans are affected by food allergies and every 3 minutes a food allergy reaction sends someone to the emergency room. In the U.S. the 8 most common food allergens are milk, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, and shellfish. A food allergy occurs when your immune system mistakenly identifies a specific food, an allergen, as something harmful. In response, your immune system tries to neutralize the allergen by producing an antibody called immunoglobulin-E (IgE). The next time you ingest even a small amount of that allergen, IgE antibodies recognize it as harmful and trigger your immune system to release certain chemicals, such as histamine, into your bloodstream. These chemicals are what cause an allergic reaction to occur.

It is important to note that a food allergy is not the same as a food intolerance. While they may have similar symptoms, food intolerances do not invoke an immune system response and are therefore less concerning than a true allergy. Typically, those with food intolerances are able to consume small amounts of the offending food without having an adverse reaction.

Risk Factors

There is no single thing that causes a food allergy, however, there are factors that may put you at an increased risk for developing allergies. These include:

- **Family history.** If you have a family history of asthma, eczema, hives, or allergies such as hay fever.
- **Age.** Food allergies are more common in children, especially those under the age of three. With increasing age, your immune system and digestive system mature, and allergic reactions become less common.
- **Asthma.** Asthma and food allergies commonly occur together.
- **Existing allergies.** If you are already allergic to one food, you may be at an increased risk for developing other allergies.



Symptoms

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can vary from digestive problems to anaphylaxis. Food allergy symptoms usually develop within a few minutes and up to 2 hours after ingesting the offending food.

Common signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction include:

- Tingling or itching in the mouth
- Hives, itching or eczema
- Swelling of the lips, face, tongue and throat
- Dizziness or fainting
- Wheezing, nasal congestion or trouble breathing
- Abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea or vomiting

Food Allergies

Common signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis include:

- Constriction and tightening of the airways
- A swollen throat or the sensation of a lump in your throat making it difficult to breathe
- Shock with a severe drop in blood pressure
- Rapid pulse
- Dizziness or loss of consciousness

If you experience any of these symptoms immediately **inject epinephrine immediately** and then **call 911**. If you do not have an epinephrine injection, request an ambulance with epinephrine.

If You Suspect Food Allergy

Schedule an appointment with your doctor. Tell your doctor about your symptoms and which foods may be causing the reaction. Make sure to share information about any family members that suffer from allergic reactions.

Methods to identify a food allergen:

- **Food Diary:** A diary recording what foods you eat, specific eating habits, and the resulting symptoms (when or if they arise) can help identify the offending food.
- **Skin Test:** A skin prick test involves placing a small number of suspected antigens beneath your skin. If you have a positive reaction you will develop raised bumps on the skin indicated a sensitivity. However, this test alone isn't enough to confirm a food allergy.
- **Elimination Diet:** Elimination diets involve avoiding or eliminating suspected foods from the diet. Foods are gradually added back one at a time to determine which, if any, are causing the reaction. Elimination diets are often supervised by a registered dietitian who can identify what food may be causing the 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 given a small amount of the suspected allergen to see if a reaction occurs.
- **Blood Tests:** Blood tests can help measure your immune system's response to a food by checking the amount immunoglobulin E (IgE) in your bloodstream.

Nutrition and Food Allergies

Nutritional management of a food allergy is geared towards ensuring the allergen-containing food is eliminated from the diet and that nutrients inherent in those foods are adequately replaced. Long term avoidance of a specific food, or food group, can result in nutrient or mineral deficiencies. If you have a food allergy it is still important to eat a variety of foods, including lean meats, poultry, fruits, vegetables, whole grain products and healthy oils. If long term avoidance of a certain food is necessary, please speak to your registered dietitian to see if a vitamin or mineral supplement may be beneficial to help meet your needs.

Tips for Reading Food Labels

Federal laws require packaged foods in the U.S. to disclose on the label if it was made with a major food allergen. Major food allergens include milk, egg, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, and soybeans. If you have a food allergy, it is crucial that you know how to read and understand food labels before buying or eating any food product. This is true even if you have

Food Allergies

previously purchased a food several times as ingredients and manufacturing processes can change without warning. There are three ways to identify if a food item contains an allergen:

- In the ingredient list, using the allergen's common name
- Using the word "Contains" followed by the name of the allergen (e.g. "Contains milk, wheat...")
- In the ingredient list in parentheses, when the ingredient is a less common form of the allergen [e.g. "albumin (egg)"]

Manufacturers are not required by law to include advisory labeling regarding potential cross contamination with major food allergens during the manufacturing process. You may notice precautionary language such as "may contain" or "made on equipment with" but you must remember that there are no laws governing or requiring such statements. Always contact the manufacturer if you are unsure if it is safe to eat or choose a different food item.

Guidelines for Managing Your Food Allergy

- Consult a registered dietitian to help you identify which foods are safe for you to eat.
- Be sure to read all food labels carefully.
- Know what foods contain the allergen that causes allergic reactions.
- When dining out, make sure to alert the server or chef of your food allergy. Confirm that your food can be prepared without risk of cross contamination.
- Be especially careful when eating at buffets or salad bars. Cross contamination is much more likely to occur in those environments.
- Plan meals and snacks before leaving home.
- If not everyone in the household follows an allergen-free diet, take extra care when preparing food at home. Cross contamination can occur with only trace amounts of an allergen so you may want to consider having two sets of cooking and eating utensils.
- Talk to your healthcare provider about a prescription for emergency epinephrine if you are at risk for a severe allergic reaction.

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