



Food Allergy

Food allergies affect some 32 million people in the United States, including 5.6 million children under the age of 18. While food allergies are more common in babies and children, people can develop a food allergy at any age, even to foods they had previously enjoyed without problems.

One in ten U.S. adults has a food allergy. The onset of food allergies in adulthood is common and severe, with a significant portion of affected adults having to receive emergency treatment for allergic symptoms.¹

Some children may outgrow food allergies, especially those to egg, milk and wheat. However, many do not, and this presents a lifelong challenge. Allergic reactions to foods, both in children and adults, can be serious and at times life-threatening. In the United States, some 200,000 people need emergency care for allergic reactions to food each year. Of those who develop a severe reaction leading to anaphylaxis, delayed epinephrine (adrenalin) injection is a contributing factor.²

WHAT CAUSES FOOD ALLERGIES?

Every day, you depend on your body's immune system to fight off infections caused by bacteria and viruses that could make you ill.³ In addition to bacteria and viruses, sometimes your immune system will identify certain foods (or an ingredient in the food) as being dangerous. Your immune system then goes to work protecting you by activating its protective response. This overreactive protective response causes the allergic symptoms that occur in people who are allergic to the food.

There is a genetic component to some food allergies, as they tend to run in families, but there is no guarantee a child will inherit an allergy from a parent or that siblings will be affected. Research has suggested that the younger siblings of a child who has been diagnosed with peanut allergy will sometimes also be allergic to peanuts.⁴

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A FOOD ALLERGY AND A FOOD INTOLERANCE?

A food allergy involves your body's immune system, whereas a food intolerance does not.⁵ A food intolerance takes place in the digestive system and can involve such symptoms as abdominal pain, intestinal gas, bloating, and diarrhea. Even though the person who is experiencing the symptoms of a food intolerance may feel miserable, the reaction, unlike some food allergies, is not life threatening.

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR FOOD ALLERGENS?

Although nearly any food can potentially cause allergic symptoms in an individual, there are eight common types of food that account for 90% of all food allergy reactions. These foods are: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (such as walnuts and pecans etc.), shellfish (such as shrimp, crabs, etc.), wheat and soy. There are also certain seeds, particularly mustard seeds (used to prepare the familiar condiment mustard) and sesame seeds which are common allergic triggers, especially in countries where these seeds are commonly used in people's diets.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON FOOD ALLERGY SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

Allergic symptoms fall within a range from mild to severe. Sometimes the initial reaction to a food can be mild but on continued exposure to the food, the allergic symptoms may worsen. Symptoms can occur in one or several of the body's systems, including the respiratory tract (lungs), the skin, the gastrointestinal tract (the digestive system) and the cardiovascular system (the heart and blood vessels.) The majority of food allergy symptoms occur within two hours after the person has eaten the trigger food, although most occur within minutes.

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