

FOOD ALLERGIES



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
TO PROTECT YOURSELF

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Introduction

Peanuts can leave you breathless. Cat dander can lead to itchy eyes, a stuffy nose, coughing and sneezing. And most of us have suffered through those seasonal allergies with horrible pollen counts.

Approximately 60 million Americans are affected by an allergy, which means one in every five adults or children suffer from them. Allergies are common in men as well as in women. Thirty-five million people have upper respiratory symptoms, which are allergic reactions to airborne pollen. Around 10 million Americans have allergies to cats and two million present severe reactions to various insect stings.

Simply defined, an allergy is an intolerance of the immune system to specific substances. You're allergic to these substances when your body reacts adversely to them, thereby producing excessive histamine, which triggers a cascade of allergic symptoms that can affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin or cardiovascular system.

Typically a person will suspect that he or she is allergic to something before taking an allergy test. In most situations, a simple skin test will be performed first as a way to confirm a suspicion. With skin tests, several allergens can be tested simultaneously. Skin tests and blood tests are the most common types of allergy tests performed today.

75% of Americans who suffer from an allergy are allergic to ragweed. Ragweed is the late summer early fall equivalent of springtime allergies, both are brought on by pollination of flowers. Most medical professionals suggest an over the counter decongestant or antihistamine to treat the symptoms associated with a seasonal allergy.

It's believed that 11 million Americans suffer from some type of food allergy. The symptoms of a food allergy range from tingling in the mouth to swelling of the tongue and throat to more severe reactions that can actually result in death. Some childhood food allergies will go away with age. However, allergies to peanuts, fish, shellfish and nuts are considered lifetime allergies.

Some allergy reactions (such as in the case of shell fish allergies or nuts where one's breathing pipes lines will close and literally you will be out of oxygen) require immediate treatment. Other allergy reactions may be mild and require nothing more than an over-the-counter medication. Additionally, a doctor may prescribe an asthma medication such as Albuterol to provide rapid relief to acute respiratory distress.

The Danger of A Food Allergy

Food intolerance is a fairly widespread condition that can occur in a variety of diseases and affects the digestive system. For example, lactose intolerance is the most common form of food intolerance. If you ingest lactose, found in milk and dairy products, and you have an intolerance to it, you're very likely going to experience some digestive distress. It will be unpleasant, but it shouldn't cause any major damage to your health.

On the other hand, a food allergy involves an immune system response. Your body interprets the presence of the offending food as an invader and releases antibodies to combat it. It's not the food that causes all the problems; it's your body's reaction to the food.

While many of the symptoms of a food allergy are mild, some can be life-threatening.

Common reactions to a food allergy include swelling of the tongue, lips, throat, face and other body parts, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, lightheadedness, hives, eczema, and itching and tingling inside the mouth. The symptoms largely depend on the source of the allergy.

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that involves the whole body. This reaction is sudden, severe, and involves life-threatening symptoms such as rapid pulse, loss of consciousness; airway constrictions that lead to loss of breathe and shock with a significant drop in the blood pressure levels. This requires immediate medical attention.

Anaphylaxis can be triggered by any allergen.

We've already seen that an allergy is the body's immune system overreacting to what it interprets as a trespasser. This reaction is what causes your symptoms, such as itchy eyes and a cough.

A food allergy is much the same. The immune system overreacts to what it interprets as an invader and produces antibodies in response. Specifically, the body releases immunoglobulin E, which is a protein that acts an antibody, into the blood stream. This, in turn, activates an allergic reaction. It's estimated that approximately 50% of allergy sufferers have higher levels of IgE.

In addition, the body releases histamine, which is a chemical that causes the dilation of capillaries, the constriction of bronchial muscles, and a drop in blood pressure.

These two compounds are the root cause of allergy symptoms.

However, it is the abrupt anaphylaxis response that is the most intense and can be lethal to the sufferer. You may have heard the term *anaphylactic shock* before, which is a description of this reaction. Chief causes of anaphylaxis include insect stings, skin contact to latex, medications, and food. Only a tiny amount of a food allergen can cause death to the allergic within moments of exposure.

Basically, an incident of anaphylaxis begins with an itchy or irritating sensation. Some individuals experience a metallic after-taste. Anaphylactic symptoms may also include hot flashes or a sudden warm feeling, inflammation of the throat and oral cavity, hives, dyspnea or labored breathing, low blood pressure, diarrhea, gastric irritations, and fainting or loss of consciousness.

Furthermore, there are cases wherein the symptoms fade away for a moment but then come back within a few hours. This is known as a biphasic reaction.

Warning Signs

We've taken a look at some of the common symptoms of food allergies. These, of course, are the biggest warning signs. However, you may have a food allergy that's a little more subtle in its symptoms. The following list is particularly frustrating because these warning signs could point to any number of illnesses, and in fact, most people wouldn't even consider a food allergy in most cases. Still, they are good to note:

- Insomnia or sleeping difficulties
- Moodiness
- Fatigue
- Heartburn
- Constipation
- Symptoms that resemble arthritis
- Canker sores
- Nocturnal enuresis or bed wetting
- Inflammation of the face and lips
- Rhinitis
- Migraines

- Wheezing

Simple headaches can be a symptom of an allergic reaction to chocolates and wheat. Migraines, on the other hand, are typically caused by an allergy to cheese, nuts, citrus fruits, tomatoes, milk, eggs, and MSG or monosodium glutamate.

Eczema or atopic dermatitis, which is a swelling and drying of the skin, can be a sign of an allergy to citrus fruits, or eggs, or tomatoes. Hives can be an indication of an allergy to tomatoes, eggs, shellfish, mangoes, pork meat, nuts, or strawberries.

Asthma is commonly seen in wheat and egg allergies.

There are also allergy responses that affect the physical energy, consciousness, and emotions of a person. These reactions are commonly seen in allergies to wheat, soybeans, corn, and milk.

Since such warning signs can easily be mistaken for other events going on in your body, it's important to work with your doctor to determine whether or not your symptoms are related to a food allergy and if so, which foods are causing you trouble.

Testing For A Food Allergy

There are a number of testing procedures a medical professional can use to determine whether or not a patient is allergic to certain foods. One of these procedures is blood testing.

As we mentioned earlier, immunoglobulin E is produced when the body reacts to a food allergen. Blood testing can uncover the presence of the immunoglobulin E or IgE in the blood, indicating there has been an allergic reaction. Unfortunately, the test can't identify the specific food behind the reaction. Nor can it determine the intensity of the allergic reaction. In fact, it's possible that the IgE level is so slight in the blood system that the test comes back negative.

If blood testing is inconclusive, there are other allergy tests that can be tried. These include skin prick tests, elimination diets, and food challenges.

Types of Food Allergies

Although any type of food can cause an allergic reaction, there are eight primary foods that are generally behind an allergic reaction. These foods are: milk, peanuts, fish, soy, wheat, eggs, tree nuts, and shellfish.

Generally, an individual will be allergic to only one or two of these foods. In rare cases, more. Sometimes, however, it's worth noting that being allergic to one type of food may lead to allergic reactions to other foods that are similar in nature. For instance, an allergic reaction to wheat may also cause a reaction to rye. An allergy to pollens may cause an allergy to green apples, hazelnuts, almonds, and peaches. An allergy to goat's milk may also be associated with an allergy to cow's milk. And the list goes on and on.

So let's take a look at these eight food allergies up close.

A Milk Allergy

A milk allergy refers to the adverse reactions that involve one or more proteins of milk, whether belonging to the whey protein or casein group. A milk allergy is relatively common in children, affecting over 3% of infants, because cow's milk is usually the first substance a baby encounters. However, this condition can develop into other allergic reactions from other protein sources when the baby grows into childhood and then adulthood.

Milk allergy symptoms can appear immediately after consumption or several hours (and even days) after the intake of cow's milk. Among the children and adults who experience this condition, the most common symptoms include nausea, diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal cramps and other problems involving the skin, such as eczema or hives.

Your physician should be able to easily diagnose your child if he or she has a milk allergy, especially if the symptoms appeared right after your child moved to cow's milk formula. It can also be relatively easy to diagnose for an adult who frequently experiences symptoms after eating milk-based foods. However, the diagnosis can be challenging for older children and adults who may be exposed to milk indirectly through milk-based foods and drinks.

To determine if a person has milk allergy, doctors will run several laboratory tests, the same tests they run for other forms of allergies, including blood tests and skin-prick examinations. Your physician may try to eliminate potential milk products one at a time to determine the primary cause behind your milk allergy.

There is a difference between a milk allergy and intolerance to lactose. While the first appears as a response of the immune system, the latter is in response of the digestive system's inability to digest lactose.

If you've been diagnosed with a milk allergy, the best way to minimize the symptoms is to use a milk substitute in your diet. Water or fruit juice can represent a milk surrogate in many recipes. Goat's milk, unfortunately, does not offer a viable alternative for those who suffer from a milk allergy. The proteins found in goat's milk are comparable to the ones found in cow's milk. Hence, the allergic reaction appears in this case, too.

In addition, it's has been discovered that certain products that contain tuna fish include in their composition a milk protein named casein. Hence, tuna fish is one of the foods that can aggravate a milk allergy. Meats and butter also contain this protein. In fact, numerous foods contain milk or milk products that can potentially lead to an allergic reaction. As a result, those with a milk allergy need to treat it as any other food allergy and learn to interpret ingredient labels.

Treating milk allergy using medicines will not cure this condition. The only way to prevent allergic reactions from cow's milk is to avoid any products that may be the cause of the problem. Since avoiding milk products can be difficult, as we've demonstrated above, you may want to enlist the help of a professional dietician to supervise your treatment.

A Peanut Allergy

According to some recent statistical data, as many as 1.5 million Americans are reported to suffer from a peanut allergy. Even more frightening, the peanut allergy is also the main cause of anaphylaxis. 80 percent of the cases of this lethal allergic reaction are related to a peanut allergy.

With this in mind, before we go any further, we need to distinguish the difference between a peanut allergy and a peanut intolerance.

While the latter is characterized by indigestion and heartburn, a peanut allergy can have very serious symptoms. In addition, intolerance to peanuts doesn't involve the immune system, while a peanut allergy is a reaction created by your immune system to contact with a peanut protein. A person with a peanut allergy can experience a reaction so severe that it can cause death within minutes.

The symptoms associated with a peanut allergy are similar to the symptoms experienced by other allergies. However, a peanut allergy is far more likely to result in anaphylaxis. This reaction is characterized by wheezing, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and dizziness. Your pulse can be either very weak or very fast, and the situation will require immediate attention.

In the case of the most dangerous allergic reactions, Epinephrine (adrenalin) is often used as an emergency medication. Included in these situations are insect stings, food allergy reactions, or drug allergy reactions. The form of delivery is most often an EpiPen, which is a self-injecting shot of epinephrine.

Eating any food that contains even a trace of peanuts or peanut by-products (or by even breathing in the dust from peanuts), can set up an allergic reaction. Because of this severity, many organizations have taken preventative measures to keep their employees and customers safer. For instance, many airlines no longer hand out small packages of peanuts as in-flight snacks. And many schools no longer offer foods that contain peanuts or peanut by-products in their cafeterias.

These are important steps because the most effective way to minimize your potential for an allergic reaction is to avoid peanuts, peanut proteins, and peanut by-products.

You might not expect them, but peanuts can be found in these common items: Worcestershire sauce, bakery products (especially in those environments where mixing equipment is likely to contain traces of peanuts), crackers, cakes, various snacks and deserts, vitamin tablets that contain peanut oil, almond powder and chopped almonds.

The good news: 25% of children with a peanut allergy will grow out of it. In addition, recent studies using a genetically engineered antibody have shown some promise. This antibody latches onto the rogue IgE antibodies (which your body releases in reaction to your exposure to the peanut allergens) and prevents them from binding to mast cells.

A Fish Allergy

A fish allergy is more likely to come on in adulthood. It can be triggered by salmon, cod, tuna, snapper, etc. It's also fairly common that an allergic reaction to one fish may eventually spread to include a number of other types of fish. And it's rare that your doctor will be able to narrow down the specific culprit of your allergy, so for fish allergy sufferers it's generally best to avoid all fish.

At its mildest, you may experience some itching in the mouth or some mouth tingles after eating fish. At its worst, a fish allergy can result in anaphylactic shock. As we've mentioned previously, this reaction causes the swelling of tissues and can cause breathing, cardiac, and gastrointestinal difficulties.

On the more positive side, fish doesn't tend to show up as an ingredient in a wide variety of other foods, as does something such as wheat or soy. And the FDA requires that food labels clearly indicate the presence of fish in the list of ingredients. So at least allergy sufferers shouldn't be caught off guard.

A Soy Allergy

Vegetarians and health enthusiasts have known for years that foods rich in soy protein offer a good alternative to meat, poultry, and other animal-based products. As consumers have pursued healthier lifestyles in recent years, consumption of soy foods has grown steadily, bolstered by scientific studies showing health benefits from these products. The Food and Drug Administration has even given food manufacturers permission to put labels on products high in soy protein indicating that these foods may help lower heart disease risk.

Unfortunately, nearly 0.5% of the population has a soy allergy. It could easily be higher except for the fact that adults rarely experience this allergy. It's an allergy more commonly found in infants, with the average age around three months. The good news is that infants often outgrow their soy allergy by the age of three or four.

Common symptoms of soy allergies include: eczema and acne-like rashes, nasal congestion, asthma, swelling, canker sores, fever blisters, hay fever, low

blood pressure, itching, breathing problems, fatigue, vomiting, diarrhea and in some severe cases anaphylaxis.

Currently, the only way to treat a soy allergy is to avoid those foods that trigger your reactions. Even the most diligent label-readers and ingredient-checkers can be inadvertently exposed to proteins that elicit an allergic response at some point. That's why those with a soy allergy severe enough to cause anaphylactic reactions should wear medical alert bracelets or necklaces and carry a syringe of adrenaline (epinephrine) obtained by prescription from their physicians.

Soybeans and soy products can be found in baked goods, tuna, cereals, crackers, infant formulas, sauces, soups, and in some peanut butters. It's always wise to read the product labels closely. You want to be cautious about by-products that may use soybeans.

A Wheat Allergy

As we've mentioned, some food allergies are not allergies at all. In reality, they're simply a food intolerance. This extends to wheat allergies as well. The truth is this: only a very small percentage of the population suffers from true wheat allergies. Many others, who believe they're suffering from a wheat allergy, are simply experiencing an intolerance.

A true allergic reaction to wheat and wheat products comes on quite suddenly and can actually be life threatening. In fact, you may very well experience anaphylactic-type symptoms such as hives, swelling, difficulty breathing, coughing, and vomiting. A person experiencing an allergic response to wheat requires immediate medical attention or otherwise risks serious complications and possibly even death.

If you suspect you might be allergic to wheat or wheat products, you shouldn't hesitate to see their doctor as soon as possible. A simple blood test can easily determine if you're truly allergic or not. If it is determined that you're allergic to wheat, you'll want to immediately begin taking steps to prevent your further exposure to wheat, thus minimizing future allergic responses. As with most medical conditions, awareness of your allergy is the most important first step to treating the allergy.

By the way, even very small children can have wheat allergies. As a parent, if you suspect such an allergy, you'll want to take the necessary steps to having your child diagnosed as early as possible. While your child may not fully

understand or appreciate the diagnosis, you and your physician can begin to teach your child how to adapt to the changes in life style that will be necessary to minimize future allergic reactions.

The only treatment for a true wheat allergy is to completely eliminate wheat from your diet. This may sound simple and easily undertaken at first, but in reality it's quite a daunting task. Wheat is found in many of the foods that comprise the American diet. The basic foods to avoid are grain products such as bread, cereal, and pasta. However, the allergy sufferer will also have to avoid cakes, cookies, crackers and pies. In addition, wheat may also be an ingredient in many canned foods.

What many of us do not realize is that wheat is also often used as a thickener. Foods such as soups, gravies and sauces use wheat for this purpose, so they'll also need to be avoided. And some drinks such as beer and root beer can contain wheat products. The list of foods that contain wheat can be quite extensive. For this reason, if you've been diagnosed with wheat allergies, you'd be wise to consult a registered dietician for diet alternatives that can help to prevent future allergic reactions while still maintaining a healthy well-rounded diet.

An Egg Allergy

An egg allergy is most commonly found in children below the age of five, and they are most likely to gradually grow out of it after the age of five. It's the protein in the egg white that's usually responsible for the allergic reaction, though in some cases the protein found in the yolk can be responsible.

Symptoms of an egg allergy reflect the symptoms of most food allergies and include skin rashes and eczema, hives, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty breathing, coughing, sneezing, runny eyes and nose, and wheezing. A severe egg allergy can result in anaphylaxis, which closes the respiratory tract, causing the inability to breathe normally. This can be fatal in some cases and is especially dangerous in the case of infants.

As with other allergies, there are two primary tests that will help your physician determine the source of your allergy. The first is a skin scratch test. The second is a blood test. Once you're sure it's eggs that are causing your reactions, the best way to prevent future allergic reactions is to avoid those products containing eggs or egg extract.

Unfortunately, there are numerous foods that contain eggs. It's therefore important that you learn to read package labels carefully. Any mention of egg whites or egg yolks are red flags. Those are foods to avoid.

Not everything comes in a package, however. Many fast food items also contain eggs. Milk shakes, bread, and baked goods can all contain eggs and/or egg products. Do a little research first. Discovering the ingredients of your favorite fast food items ahead of time can save you plenty of misery and discomfort.

In those cases when you have a young child who's been diagnosed with an egg allergy, especially if it's a severe allergy, your physician may suggest that you keep epinephrine on hand. In the case of the most dangerous allergic reactions, Epinephrine (adrenalin) is often used as an emergency medication. The form of delivery is most often an EpiPen, which is a self-injecting shot of epinephrine.

A Tree Nut Allergy

Affecting millions of people worldwide, a tree nut allergy is often mistaken as a peanut allergy. However, while dried fruits cause a tree nut allergy, peanut allergies are caused by different kinds of legumes. The symptoms of these two conditions are alike, however. And it's worth noting that a person allergic to one isn't necessarily allergic to the other.

Allergies to tree nut products are usually more prevalent in children, but they may also occur with adults. Just as with other allergies, it's treated by avoiding the foods that come from the source of the allergen – in this case, nut particles, oils and tree nuts. Tree nuts include all kinds of nuts that grow on trees, such as walnuts, pecan, pistachio, cashews, hazelnuts, filbert, hickory nuts, almonds, macadamia, beechnuts and chestnuts.

Unfortunately, allergies from these nut families are common and life threatening. Since these nuts are usually found in candy bars, chocolates, drinks, cereals and other sweets that children love, it is important to be aware of what your child eats to identify if ever he or she experiences the symptoms of tree nut allergy.

Common symptoms of this condition include skin reactions including eczema, rashes, itching, swelling, inflammation and hives. A tree nut allergy can also cause gastrointestinal symptoms, such as vomiting, stomach pains and diarrhea. Some severe cases experience nausea, rapid heartbeat, loss of breath,

wheezing, running nose and itching around the areas of the mouth.

If your child experiences more than four of these symptoms, consult your doctor immediately for appropriate treatments. While the doctor could give your child epinephrine injections, it cannot cure the allergies for good.

The most effective way to avoid these allergies is through your child's diet. Make sure that all his or her snacks, meals, sweets and other food items do not include any of the contributing factors of tree nut allergy. As parents, you have to be sure to read label ingredients to find hidden nut sources in your food items.

A Shellfish Allergy

Crabs, lobster, shrimp, clams ... these are all shellfish that can cause an allergic reaction. Symptoms can include hives, itching, swelling of the lips, tongue and throat, wheezing, trouble breathing, abdominal pain, vomiting, tingling in the mouth or lightheadedness.

While an anaphylaxis reaction is rare, it can occur and it can be life-threatening when it affects breathing. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include a swollen throat which creates breathing difficulty, a drop in blood pressure, lightheadedness, or a rapid pulse.

If you experience any of these symptoms shortly after eating shellfish, you should see your doctor. Don't put it off. See your medical practitioner as soon as possible. Even while the allergic reaction is occurring if possible.

As we've discussed with other food allergies, when your immune system initially views some of the proteins from the shellfish as enemies, it releases antibodies to combat them. The next time, these antibodies are joined by histamine and other chemicals, and together these create your allergy symptoms.

Finally, some people will be allergic to only one type of shellfish and will experience no allergic reaction to other shellfish. Other people will have an allergic reaction to all shellfish.