

FOOD ALLERGIES

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Introduction

Food allergies are on the rise and as a result more people are becoming in tune with this very important issue. A true food allergy, sometimes called a *food hypersensitivity*, causes the body to produce an immune reaction in response to eating a certain food. Recent studies show that almost 1 in 20 children under the age of five years of age and nearly 1 in 25 adults have an allergy to at least one food. Allergies are often inherited and most oftentimes diagnosed early in life.

Causes

A food allergy is caused when the body reacts to a usually harmless food substance perceiving it as harmful. The allergen, a protein found in the food, sets off a chain reaction. When this allergen is consumed in the food, the body protects itself by making antibodies. These antibodies then trigger the release of certain chemicals such as histamine. In turn, these chemicals produce uncomfortable symptoms like nausea, wheezing, hives or itching.

Common Food Allergies

There are several types of foods that can cause allergic responses. The most common food allergies with a few examples are listed below:

- Milk: fluid milk, yogurt, cheese
- Eggs
- Fish: bass, flounder, and cod

- Shellfish: crab, lobster, and shrimp
- Tree nuts: almonds, pecans, walnuts
- Peanuts
- Wheat: wheat bread, flour tortillas
- Soybeans: lecithin, tofu

It is important to note that for children, allergies to eggs, milk and soy products can oftentimes be outgrown, however adults that develop food allergies tend to have their allergies for the rest of their lives.

Symptoms

The most common symptoms include swelling, itching, and nausea. Most symptoms affect the skin, respiratory system, stomach or intestines, and may vary depending upon the person and the food consumed. The following is a basic list of symptoms caused by food allergies:

Skin Reactions:

- Swelling of the lips, tongue and face
- Itchy eyes, mouth, and skin
- Hives or rash

Respiratory Tract:

- Itching and/or tightness in the throat
- Shortness of breath
- Dry or raspy cough and/or wheezing
- Runny nose

Digestive Tract:

- Abdominal pain and cramping
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea

Usually symptoms are not serious. However, sometimes a very severe reaction or “anaphylaxis” can cause severe illness and even death. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include rash, swelling and tightening of the throat, low blood pressure, irregular heartbeat and gastrointestinal distress. These symptoms usually begin within a few minutes after eating the food. If this should happen, the person needs to seek medical treatment immediately. Oftentimes epinephrine (found in an *EpiPen*) is given to treat the severe reaction.

Preventing Symptoms

Unfortunately, there is no cure for food allergies. The only way to prevent a reaction with the food is to avoid the allergenic food altogether. Some useful tips in helping to avoid foods that cause allergies are listed below:

- Read all food labels and understand food terminology to make sure the problem food is not listed as an ingredient. Since 2006, the United States food manufacturers have been required by law to list all ingredients by their common/usual names and even disclose if the food item was prepared on or near areas where known food allergens have once been prepared.
- Be careful with cooking and serving to avoid any cross-contamination between the food allergen and foods prepared without the allergic ingredient.
- When eating away from home, make sure that the ingredients in the foods are known before ordering. Play it safe by ordering plain foods such as grilled meats, steamed vegetables, and fresh fruit. Bringing food from home helps ensure that the person with the allergy knows what it is and where it came from. Also, if the doctor has prescribed an *EpiPen*, it is important to keep it with the individual in case they consume food with the allergen.

Preventative Measures for Infants Include

- Breast-feeding infants for the first year of life and waiting until infants are four to six months of age before introducing solid foods.

- Introduce rice cereal first.
- Introduce foods slowly to a baby’s diet, one at a time, and feed it for several days before adding another food in order to easily identify an offending food.
- Do not introduce whole eggs until the child is one year of age, and wait until three years of age before feeding a child peanuts or seafood.

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