



Fighting Food Allergies

Learning the basics could help you protect your family should a food allergy ever arise

TODAY'S WORLD SEEMS TO HAVE an increased awareness of food allergies and what it means to suffer from them. While it is estimated that only four percent of the overall American population has a food allergy, the seriousness of these allergies has been recently addressed, and now help is easily found. Allergy advice and recipes for those with restricted diets are becoming more accessible. These new resources help make mealtimes an enjoyable experience for those who suffer and help them to cope.

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy occurs when the body's immune system mistakes a food protein as a threat and attacks it. The body's immune system is designed to recognize and destroy harmful germs that make people ill, such as bacteria or viruses. When the immune system mistakes a food as an allergen the body releases histamine and other chemicals which can result in digestive problems, as well as, hives, swollen airways, and anaphylaxis.

Food allergies are not to be confused

with food intolerances; this is a less serious condition that doesn't involve the immune system. Lactose intolerance is an example of a common food intolerance.

What are the most common food allergies?

A person may be allergic to any food; however, eight foods are responsible for 90 percent of all food allergies. The most common food allergens are found in cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy.

What are the reactions to food allergies?

Reactions to food allergens can range from very mild to severe, even resulting in death. Mild symptoms include hives, rashes, itchy mouth, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, nasal congestion, or a runny nose. Symptoms on the other end of the spectrum, called anaphylaxis, can include obtrusive swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat; trouble swallowing; shortness of breath; wheezing; loss of consciousness; or chest pain. If the reaction is severe enough, a person may go into anaphylactic shock, meaning that blood pressure has dropped to a dangerously low level.

Most allergic reactions occur after ingestion of a problem food. Although rare, it is also possible for people to suffer allergic reactions from simply smelling or touching problem foods, so it is important to be aware of your surroundings. Being near a problem food while it is cooked can also cause inhalant reactions from the food proteins being released by heat. If a problem food allergen touches your skin a reaction is also possible, most likely localized itching or redness, but if you then touch your hands to your mouth a more severe reaction could occur.

Who gets food allergies?

The National Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates approximately 12 million Americans have some form of food allergy. While only four percent of the adult population suffers from food allergies, roughly six to eight percent of children under age three have a food allergy. Many children will outgrow their allergy as they get older.

Children whose parents suffer from allergic diseases, such as asthma, eczema, or food or environmental allergies, are at a higher risk for developing food allergies of their own. Food allergies can affect people of all races and ethnicities; they can also develop at any age, although most commonly develop in early childhood.

How are food allergies treated?

Although these symptoms may sound scary, they are typically treatable. People who are severely allergic to foods should carry epinephrine, also known as adrenaline. Epinephrine is a hormone and neurotransmitter which increases heart rate, contracts blood vessels, and dilates air passages. The most common form of epinephrine is a syringe with a single dose (an autoinjector) which can be administered very quickly at the onset of symptoms.

How are food allergies diagnosed?

If you think you have a food allergy, see a doctor; do not try to diagnose yourself. Self-diagnosis and treatment can result in unnecessary dietary restrictions and inadequate nutrition, especially in children. Specialists called “allergists” can use many methods to diagnose and treat food allergies, including medical history, skin prick tests, blood tests, food challenges, and elimination diets.

How do you protect yourself?

Always be conscious of your surroundings. If you or someone close to you has a serious food allergy make sure to read all food labels carefully; especially for baked goods and foods not prepared at home. Even those most vigilant can have accidents, which is why it is important to always carry medication with you and wear emergency identification jewelry.

Although food allergies may seem daunting, they can be managed by paying close attention to what you eat and avoiding problem foods. Eventually, coping with allergies will become part of a routine and you can once again find the joy in eating! ♦

Take Control of Your Food Allergies

- **Consult a doctor.** If you suspect you have a food allergy, consult a doctor or specialist to be sure.
- **Become educated about food allergies.** Do some research, there are many web sites and books that will help you learn about your food restrictions.
- **Always be prepared!** Wear identification jewelry, carry medications and autoinjector pens, and develop a plan in the event of an emergency.
- **Write it down.** Keep a journal of allergic reactions and document the foods and severity of reactions, this may help you and your doctor manage your allergies.
- **Put it in perspective.** Don't allow food allergies to rule your life. Focus on what you can eat as opposed to what you cannot.