

Understanding Food Allergies

Learn how to eat a healthy diet and manage your food allergies

About one of every twenty Americans has a food allergy. So even if you're not allergic to any foods, chances are a family member or friend is dealing with this important issue. Some food allergies are minor and cause only slight discomfort. Others can be quite serious and cause severe reactions, hospitalization or even death. So learning how to prevent allergic reactions and how to help if a reaction occurs is very important to all of us.

What is a Food Allergy?

A food allergy occurs when the body mistakenly identifies a food as harmful. The body reacts in an attempt to fight off what it sees as a harmful substance. It's this reaction (or immune response) that causes the problem. In some cases this reaction causes unpleasant symptoms like itching or hives. In severe cases the reaction can swiftly lead to breathing difficulties, drops in blood pressure or other symptoms that require immediate medical care. Unlike food allergies, 'food intolerances' involve the digestive tract rather than the immune system. A common example is the upset stomach many people experience from lactose intolerance when they eat dairy products. This problem is usually uncomfortable, but not as dangerous as a food allergy.

Which Foods Cause Allergies?

Many foods can cause allergic reactions, however 90% of all food allergies are reactions to milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans. While some people are allergic to more than one of these foods, luckily most people dealing with this problem only have a single food allergy. Since there are no known cures, experts recommend two very important strategies to cope with this problem; (1) Avoidance: Strictly avoiding exposure to anything that contains or has been exposed to the food you are allergic to, and (2) Immediate Treatment: Rapidly seeking medical care if you have been exposed to a food you are allergic to.

Avoiding Food Allergens in the Grocery Store

If you or someone you live with has a food allergy, learning how to shop is important. When you buy packaged food in a grocery or convenience store, make sure to read ingredient labels carefully. Popular products often contain ingredients you wouldn't expect (like anchovies in Caesar salad dressing.) That's why reading the entire

ingredient listing is important. If the label is confusing or if you are unsure about any ingredients, call or write the manufacturer. Most major manufacturers have people trained to help answer your questions about their products.

Managing Food Allergies When Eating Out

Packaged foods are often produced under tightly controlled conditions with automated manufacturing equipment. Eating meals out is very different. Restaurants and home cooks don't usually provide detailed ingredient lists for the food being served. They frequently vary ingredients to serve what's fresh and to accommodate the special of the day. When you eat out your food is often being prepared by a chef or cook in an open kitchen where many ingredients are being handled. But there are ways to help avoid food allergens when dining out:

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate.

Most restaurant managers, chefs and food service workers want to help make your experience as positive and safe as possible. It's important for you to communicate your needs to them early and often.

- Talk to the restaurant manager.
- Tell them about the foods you are allergic to.
- Ask to see the recipe or ingredient list.
- Remind them of your needs every time you visit.



Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives.

Just4U[®]

Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.

Management can help you steer clear of foods that you need to avoid. However, most kitchens use dozens, if not hundreds of ingredients that contain milk, eggs, fish, nuts, wheat, soybeans or other common food allergens. Since these ingredients are so widely used, it's important to be prepared to treat a reaction if you do accidentally consume a food you are allergic to.

Be Prepared - Be Safe

If you or a family member have a food allergy, have a treatment action plan. If your doctor has prescribed or recommended medication, make sure to keep it with you when you're eating out. Also, if a medical alert bracelet or necklace is recommended be sure to wear it. At the first sign of allergic reaction seek medical care immediately. If medical care is not available on site, call 911 to get emergency medical assistance. If you are dining out and notice that someone else is having an allergic reaction, notify your server or the restaurant manager as soon as possible so they can get help.

Learn to be Allergy Smart

People with food allergies do all they can to avoid foods they're allergic to. But food allergens can show up in unexpected places. If you're allergic to any of the eight 'major allergens', the following guide can help you identify some foods to avoid:*

Milk: Margarines, chewing gums, cold cuts, breads and cold cereals can contain milk proteins.

Eggs: Many baked goods, ice creams, pastas, breaded foods, candies, salad dressings and canned soups contain eggs or ingredients from eggs.

Fish: Worcester sauce and Caesar salad dressing usually contain anchovies.

Shellfish: Many fish stocks, fish sauces and seafood flavorings contain shellfish.

Tree Nuts: Pesto sauces usually contain pignoli nuts. Many cereals, cookies, chocolates and energy bars contain tree nuts. Natural extracts, used as flavoring for baked goods and candy, can be made from tree nuts such as almonds or hazelnuts.

Peanuts: Peanuts can be included in some chocolate candy. Peanut oils, such as 'cold pressed' or 'extruded' oils that are not highly processed, contain peanut protein.

Wheat: Battered fried foods, soy sauce, beer, ale, some processed meats (like hot dogs) may contain wheat.

Soy: Many meat alternatives are made from soy. Also, some canned tuna, breakfast cereals and energy bars contain soy protein.

Part of being 'allergy smart' is understanding which foods contain common allergens. For example soy ingredients are widely used in Asian food and peanuts are a common ingredient in both African and Asian cuisines. It's a good idea to avoid eating out at places where foods you are allergic to are frequently served, since there is a higher risk of "cross-contact".

Food Allergies and Children

Common childhood allergies include milk, eggs, wheat and peanuts. If you are the parent or caregiver of a child with a food allergy, make sure you share a written treatment plan with the school nurse, school food service manager, before and after-school activity leaders and other friends and family members.

Fully inform them about your child's allergy and make sure the adults in your child's life know how to access emergency care. Also, be sure to teach your child basic safety tips such as how to ask questions about ingredients and not to share lunches or snacks with classmates.

More Information

If you or someone in your life have a food allergy it's important to learn more. No one source of information can tell you everything you need to know. Be sure and talk with your family doctor and a registered dietitian for advice about avoiding food allergens and maintaining a healthy diet. Consider making an appointment with a doctor that specializes in treatment of allergies. Learn as much as possible and make sure you have a plan that works for you.

The following web sites are good sources of more information: foodallergy.org; acaai.org; ifc.org



* This list is not complete, please consult your family doctor or a registered dietitian for additional information.