

FOOD ALLERGIES



Introduction

Many people experience undesirable symptoms when eating certain foods. Seldom are those symptoms caused by a food allergy. A true food allergy, sometimes called food hypersensitivity, causes the body to produce an immune reaction in response to eating a certain food. True food allergies are not as common as people think. Only about 2 percent of adults and up to 6 percent of children in the United States have true food allergies, most often causing trouble for children under a year. Allergies are often inherited and most times diagnosed early in life.

Causes

A food allergy is caused when the body reacts to a usually harmless food substance, thinking it's harmful. The allergen, a protein found in the food, sets off a chain reaction. When this allergen is consumed in the food, the person's 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 hives or itching.

Common Food Allergies

There are a several types of foods that can cause allergic responses; however, they can differ in both children and adults. The most common food allergies are listed below:

Adults: Peanuts, seafood like crab, crawfish, lobster, shrimp, tree nuts like almonds, Brazil nuts, hazelnuts, pecans, walnuts, and fish.

Children: Milk, eggs, peanuts, soybeans, tree nuts, wheat, fish, and shellfish.

Allergies to eggs and cow's milk may disappear as you get older while allergies to nuts, legumes, fish, and seafood may last a lifetime. The amount of allergen that produces the allergic response varies, but can be very small.

Common Food Allergies

The most common symptoms include swelling, sneezing and nausea. Most symptoms affect the skin, respiratory system, stomach or intestines, and may vary depending on the person and the food consumed.

Skin reactions: Swelling of the lips, tongue and face, itchy eyes, hives or rash.

Respiratory Tract: Itching and/or tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, dry or raspy cough, runny nose, and wheezing (asthma).

Digestive Tract: Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and 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 GI 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 is given to treat the severe reaction.

Treatment

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

- Read food labels and understand food terminology to make sure the problem food is not listed as an ingredient. For example, people with egg allergies should avoid mayonnaise and many salad dressings. Also, certain terms like "natural flavorings or ingredients" may hide proteins which are likely to cause allergic reactions.
- Be careful with cooking and serving to avoid any cross-contact between the food allergen and foods prepared without the allergic ingredient.
- When eating away from home, make sure that you know the ingredients in the foods before you order. Play it safe by ordering plain foods such as grilled meats, steamed vegetables, and fresh fruit. Also, you may want to bring some food from home just in case.

Preventative measures for infants include:

- Breast-feeding infants for the first year of life and waiting until infants are 4 to 6 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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