

Food Allergies and How to Manage Them

Food Allergies and Allergic Reactions

Your body has an immune system to keep you healthy. It does this by destroying germs (bacteria, viruses) that cause illness.

If you have a food allergy, your immune system overreacts to a food (or a substance in a food). It sees it as a threat and triggers a protective response. This is called an **allergic reaction**.

Allergic reactions can be mild or life-threatening. They can develop at any time. Just because you haven't had a reaction to a food before, doesn't mean your body won't react to it in the future. You may be able to outgrow a food allergy.

Symptoms

Symptoms of a food reaction can be mild or severe. They can affect many parts of your body.

Mild symptoms include:

- itchy, red, swollen skin (hives)
- dry, itchy rash (eczema)
- skin redness around your eyes
- upset stomach (nausea) or throwing up (vomiting)
- diarrhea
- pain in your stomach
- itchy mouth or inside your ears
- unusual taste in your mouth
- sneezing, or a stuffy or runny nose
- dry cough
- uterine contractions.

Severe symptoms include:

- swelling of your lips, tongue, throat or all three (anaphylactic shock)
- trouble swallowing
- shortness of breath or wheezing
- turning blue
- feeling faint, confused, weak or passing out
- pain in your chest
- a weak pulse
- a sense of "impending doom."

If you have any severe symptoms, you need treatment right away. Work with your health care provider or allergist to help you understand how to prevent and treat reactions.

The Major Food Allergens

There are 8 foods (called the "major food allergens") that are most likely to cause an allergic reaction. These include:

- milk
- eggs
- peanuts
- tree nuts (walnuts, pecans, pistachios, almonds, cashews)
- wheat
- soy
- fish (such as bass, flounder, cod)
- shellfish (such as lobster, shrimp, crab).

(over)

By law, all foods regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) must clearly state on the label if they contain one or more of these major food allergens.

Hidden Allergens

Sometimes food allergens can be “hidden” in everyday foods and products. Examples include:

- make-up (milk, peanuts, tree nuts, soy)
- over-the-counter and prescription medicines (wheat, milk, soy)
- craft supplies and paints (egg, wheat)
- pet foods (milk, egg, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, fish)
- natural and artificial flavorings (tree nuts)
- condiments (wheat, fish).

If you have a food allergy, it’s important to know which foods and products contain that allergen.

Cross-contact

Sometimes a food you aren’t allergic to (a safe food) can cause a reaction if it has come into contact with an allergen. This is called cross-contact.

To prevent safe foods from cross-contact:

- Avoid foods to which you have an allergy (problem foods).
- Carefully clean anything (cutting boards, pans, etc.) that comes into contact with problem foods with soap and warm water.
- Cook safe foods first.
- Scrub down countertops and tables with soap and warm water. Make sure to wash your hands too!
- Do not share utensils, beverages or food with others.

How to Manage Food Allergies

It can be difficult to manage food allergies — but it can be done! Learning about food allergies and knowing your problem food(s) are good first steps.

Here are some other things you can do to prevent an allergic reaction:

■ Avoid problem foods.

- Read labels on everything you eat, drink or use. This includes all packaged products (such as food, lotions, paints).
- Be aware of cross-contact. This can happen at home, in restaurants or cafeterias, or anywhere else a food allergen is. See the list (at left) for tips for preventing safe foods from cross contact.

■ Plan ahead.

Even if you’re careful, accidents happen. To help prepare you for a reaction:

- Always carry your medicine (epinephrine) to treat a life-threatening reaction. It’s important to make sure your medicine has not expired or been damaged by heat or cold.
- Fill out an emergency care plan with your health care provider. You can print off a copy at foodallergy.org/downloads. Make sure you, and your family, friends, teachers, colleagues and others close to you know what to do in case you have a reaction.
- Wear a medical ID that lists your allergies.

■ Treat an allergic reaction.

It’s important to know which symptoms to look for and how to respond. **If you’re having a serious reaction, you’ll need to treat it with epinephrine. Always call 911 right away after using epinephrine.** You will need to receive follow-up care.

Whom to Call With Questions

Talk with your health care provider or allergist if you have questions about food allergies.