

Understanding Food Allergies and Intolerances

Are you allergic to any foods? Do you notice that your body does not tolerate certain foods well? You may find it surprising to know that less than 8% of children and 4% of adults have true food allergies, but many more than that have intolerances to certain foods. An allergist can help determine whether you suffer from a true food allergy or a food intolerance.

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is an abnormal reaction to food that involves the body's immune system. When an offending food is eaten, the body produces an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE) in response to that food. The reaction sometimes is mild and involves skin reactions, such as hives or eczema around the mouth or on other areas of the body. Sometimes a mild allergy may affect the gastrointestinal (GI) tract and cause nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Other food allergies are more severe, resulting in asthma-type symptoms, difficulty breathing, coughing, or wheezing. In some people, food allergies are very severe and can result in anaphylaxis, a reaction that involves the whole body and sometimes is fatal.

The most common foods that cause allergic reactions are peanuts, tree nuts, milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, wheat, and soy.

What is a food intolerance?

A food intolerance is an abnormal response to a food that does not involve the immune system. Intolerances are more common than food allergies. However, symptoms sometimes are similar to those of a food allergy, such as GI problems, hives, or itching around the mouth. Intolerance symptoms generally are mild and sometimes inconvenient, but are rarely life threatening.

A good example of a food intolerance is lactose intolerance, a condition that results in nausea, cramping, and diarrhea when dairy foods are eaten. This is an intolerance to the sugar in milk known as lactose. Many people think they are allergic to milk, when in reality they are lactose intolerant and can drink milk or eat dairy foods in small amounts without having any reaction.

What is the difference between a food allergy and a food intolerance?

Sometimes it is hard to know the difference. Many people find it helpful to keep a diary of foods eaten and symptoms over a period of a few weeks. This can help you identify what foods are causing you problems. It also allows you to link symptoms with specific foods.

If you have repeated symptoms that you think are food related, it probably is a good idea to visit an allergist to determine if you have an allergy or an intolerance. The doctor can do blood tests or skin tests to identify a true food allergy.

You also can diagnose food allergies in part by a “food challenge”—introducing a food and then observing for an allergic reaction to that food. A doctor should supervise this type of testing.

Why does it matter if I have an allergy or intolerance?

Avoiding particular foods for a lifetime may prove difficult and unnecessary, and might result in a diet that is not well balanced. A healthy diet contains a variety of foods, without avoiding any one food or food group without a good reason. That is why identifying true food allergies is important before eliminating any food from the diet.

What is the treatment for a food allergy?

At this time, the only treatment is to avoid the food that you are allergic to. This is sometimes harder than it seems, because you must read carefully to make sure you are avoiding the allergen completely. For example, if you are allergic to eggs, you must avoid all components of eggs and any egg that is found in other foods, especially if your reaction is very severe.

Anaphylactic reactions to food involve the entire body and are sometimes fatal. Individuals who have anaphylactic reactions to food must carry injectable epinephrine, so it is possible to administer it as soon as possible after the allergic reaction begins.

Should I avoid all foods that I am allergic to?

Probably. However, some people do outgrow allergies. If you have received testing by an allergist and you know you are allergic to a food, you should not reintroduce the food into your diet without consulting your doctor.

If you have a food intolerance, you can reintroduce that food every now and then to assess if your body still has a reaction to that food.

References and recommended readings

American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology. Tips to remember: food allergy. Available at: www.aaaai.org/patients/publicedmat/tips/foodallergy.stm. Accessed January 10, 2011.

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