



## Food Allergies

### About Food Allergies

Food allergies present most often in babies and children, but can appear at any age. Symptoms are most commonly seen the first time the food is eaten; however, foods you have eaten for years without problems can suddenly cause allergy symptoms.

An allergy occurs when something causes your body's natural defenses to overreact. The incidence of food allergies has increased dramatically in recent years – about 32 million people in the United States have some kind of food allergy. Research has shown that up to 11% of adults and 8% of children have food allergies.

Here are some answers to common questions about food allergy.

### What are the symptoms of food allergy?

In most cases, an allergic reaction can start within seconds or minutes of eating a food. In rare cases, the reaction may not start for several hours. Reactions can be mild – such as a runny nose and sneezing – or very severe – such as

swelling of the throat or tongue, wheezing, drop in blood pressure or even death.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction may involve the skin, the gastrointestinal tract, the cardiovascular system and the respiratory tract. They can present in one or more of the following ways:

- Hives, itchiness and swelling (face, eyes, tongue)
- Vomiting and/or stomach cramps
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Repetitive cough
- Tight, hoarse throat; trouble swallowing
- Swelling of the tongue, affecting the ability to talk or breathe
- Weak pulse, low blood pressure, dizziness or feeling faint
- Pale or blue skin coloring
- Anaphylaxis, a potentially life-threatening reaction that can impair breathing and send the body into shock; reactions may simultaneously affect different parts of the body (for example, a stomachache accompanied by shortness of breath and a rash)





Many people may think they have a food allergy when what they really are experiencing is food intolerance. Food intolerance can often mimic a food allergy, causing nausea and vomiting, but it is not life-threatening.

The best way to determine whether you are experiencing a true food allergy is to see an allergist for evaluation. An allergist will help you develop an action plan to deal with whatever allergies or intolerances you may have.

## What causes allergy symptoms?

The body's natural defense network is the immune system. It keeps you healthy by fighting off infections and other dangers to good health. Most people have no problem eating many kinds of foods. An allergic reaction occurs when the immune system attacks a specific food (or something in a food) by mistake. This battle causes:

- skin areas to become red, itchy and swollen.
- blood vessels to swell.
- trouble breathing.
- tummy aches, vomiting.

## Why do I have food allergy?

We don't know the exact cause of food allergies, but we believe it is a combination of genetic and environmental exposures. For

example, if both your parents have allergies, you have about a 75 percent chance of having some form of allergy yourself. If just one of your parents is allergic, or if one of your relatives from either side has allergies, you have a 30-40 percent chance of having an allergy. If neither parent has an allergy, the chance is only 10-15 percent.

## Which foods are most likely to cause an allergy?

While any food can cause an allergic reaction, nine types of food account for about 90 percent of all reactions:

- Eggs
- Shellfish
- Cow's milk
- Wheat
- Peanuts
- Soy
- Tree nuts (such as hazelnut, cashew, walnut, almond, pistachio, pecan, brazil nut)
- Sesame
- Fish

The most common food allergies in children are eggs, milk and peanuts. The most common food allergies in adults are fish, shellfish, peanuts and tree nuts.

There may be cross-reactivity between different foods. For example, a person allergic to one tree nut may be allergic to others. Your allergist can best guide you on what you need to avoid.

Most people with a food allergy only react to one or two foods.



## How do allergists tell which foods cause my allergy?

Your history is the most important part of the diagnosis. Some people have an idea of what food or foods they are allergic to. For example, they eat peanuts or a product with peanut in it and immediately experience symptoms.

Others need an allergist's help in finding the cause. Sometimes, the symptoms may show up many hours after you have eaten the food.

Your allergist will ask you about:

- The symptoms you have after eating the food.
- How long after eating the food these symptoms occur (usually within 2 hours).
- How much of the food you ate.
- How often the reaction has occurred.
- What type of medical treatment, if any, you had.
- Your medical history will also include questions about your diet, your family's medical history, and your home and living area.

## What is allergy testing?

Your allergist may recommend allergy tests to confirm the history of food allergy. This may include skin testing. In an allergy skin test, a very small drop of a liquid food extract, one for each food, is placed on the skin.

The skin is then lightly pricked. This is safe and generally not painful. Within 15 to 20 minutes, a raised bump with redness around it, like a mosquito bite, may appear.



Sometimes, an allergy blood test may be used.

If done right, skin and blood tests are reliable and can help your allergist diagnose food allergy. Testing alone, however, is not enough to diagnose food allergy. It needs to be supported by a strong history. Some people test positive for a food allergy and have no symptoms when they eat that food. To confirm test results, your allergist may ask you to do an oral food challenge. This means you will eat or drink small portions of a food in increasing amounts over a period of time to see if an allergic reaction occurs. This is usually done under your allergist's supervision.



## Can food allergies be prevented?

The National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases has issued updated guidelines to help parents of newborns introduce peanut-containing foods to prevent peanut allergy. The guidelines address how to proceed with introduction.

The guidelines are a breakthrough for the prevention of peanut allergy. Peanut allergy has become much more frequent in recent years, and there is now a roadmap to prevent many new cases. Talk with your allergist about how you can introduce peanut-containing products to prevent peanut allergy.

## Once my allergy is known, how is it treated?

Once a food allergy is certain, the best treatment is to avoid the food. Carefully check ingredient labels of food products and learn other names for the food or foods you must avoid to be sure not to eat them.



When you eat out, be extra careful. Waiters, and sometimes the kitchen staff, may not always know every dish ingredient on the restaurant's menu. Generally, severe reactions only occur when the food is ingested.

There are new treatments currently that allow those with food allergies to protect themselves from accidental exposures and severe reactions. In 2020, the first oral immunotherapy (OIT) drug was approved by the FDA. OIT involves the oral administration of increasingly larger daily doses of the food allergen, with the goal being to reach a target daily maintenance dose that will provide protection.

Another newly-approved therapy for food allergy is omalizumab. Omalizumab, a medication previously known for asthma treatment, was approved for patients with food allergies in 2024. It aims to reduce the severity and frequency of food allergic reactions. Omalizumab is administered as a shot every 2-4 weeks (dose depends on patient's weight and total blood IgE level).

Discuss these options with your allergist to see if they may be right for you.

## What if I eat a food I'm allergic to?

Once you've been diagnosed with a food allergy, your allergist will prescribe an epinephrine device and teach you how to use it. You will also be given a treatment plan describing what medications you've been prescribed and when they should be used. Anyone with a food allergy should always have their epinephrine device nearby. Be sure to have two doses available, in case symptoms don't improve or re-occur.



Use epinephrine immediately if you experience severe symptoms such as shortness of breath, repetitive coughing, weak pulse, hives, tightness in your throat or trouble breathing or swallowing. Also use it immediately if you have a combination of symptoms from different body areas, such as hives, rashes or swelling on the skin coupled with vomiting, diarrhea or abdominal pain.

Repeated doses may be necessary. Call 911 (or have someone nearby do so) if your symptoms are not resolving or are worsening after injecting or using the epinephrine, if you are alone with no one else to help you, if you don't have a second epinephrine dose available or if you are not comfortable managing your symptoms at home. Let emergency personnel know epinephrine was administered and more may be needed. You may be taken to the emergency room.

If you are uncertain whether a reaction warrants epinephrine, use it right away; the benefits of epinephrine far outweigh the risk that a dose may not have been necessary.

## Will I ever be able to eat these foods again?

Over time, allergies to cow's milk, eggs, wheat and soy may disappear. Allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, seeds, fish and shellfish typically last a lifetime. About one-third of children and

adults who had food allergies at some point are eventually free from food allergies.

After you have avoided a food that has previously caused an allergic reaction, your allergist may want to run an oral food challenge test, under observation, to see if you are still allergic. If you have no reaction and can eat a normal portion of the food, you will be able to start eating the food again if you wish. If any allergy symptoms occur, you should continue to avoid the food.

By using caution and carefully following an allergist's advice, you can bring food allergy under control. Please talk with your allergist regarding other questions and concerns about food allergy.

## Summary

Diagnosing food allergies can be as complicated as the medical condition itself. Symptoms of food allergy can vary from person to person, and a single individual may not always experience the same symptoms during every reaction. Food-allergic reactions can affect the skin, respiratory tract, gastrointestinal tract, and/or cardiovascular system, and people may develop food allergies at different ages.

Diagnostic food allergy testing offers clues about the causes of symptoms, but it cannot determine whether someone has a food allergy with absolute certainty without an oral food



challenge. Still, when a food allergy is suspected, it is critically important to consult your allergist who can evaluate you, determine which food allergy tests to perform, determine if food allergy exists and counsel you on food allergy management once a diagnosis has been made.

**To learn more about food allergies, visit [acaai.org](http://acaai.org).**

### Find an allergist. Find relief.

Anyone with allergies and asthma should be able to feel good, be active all day and sleep well at night. You don't need to accept less. Allergists are specially trained to help you take control of your allergies and asthma, so you can live the life you want.

### When should I see an allergist?

See an allergist if you have any of these conditions. Allergists treat two of the nation's most common health problems – allergies and asthma. More than 50 million people in the United States have these allergic diseases. Although symptoms may not always be severe, allergies and asthma are serious and should be treated that way. Many people with these diseases don't realize how much better they can feel. Allergists also treat conditions with similar symptoms, such as non-allergic rhinitis.

### What is an allergist?

An allergist is trained to find the source of your symptoms, treat it and help you feel healthy. Life's too short to struggle with allergies or asthma. An allergist can help you find the answers you're looking for.

After earning a medical degree, the doctor completes a three-year residency training program in either internal medicine or pediatrics. They then finish two or three more years of study in asthma, allergy and immunology. The best way to manage your allergies or asthma is to see an allergist.