

Is it Really a Food Allergy?

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More and more individuals are living with food allergies. The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network estimates that as many as 15 million Americans or 4% of the U.S. population have at least one food allergy. The prevalence of food allergies in America is also on the rise; the Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported an 18% increase between 1997 and 2007. As food allergies become more common, people may be quick to label themselves with a food allergy even when they do not have an allergy.

Many more Americans have some type of food intolerance (also known as food sensitivity) as opposed to a true food allergy. It is important to recognize the difference as treatments can vary.

Food Allergy

A food allergy is a type of immune system response. Your body mistakenly thinks that a particular food or ingredient is harmful and so it attacks the food or ingredient. The most common types of food allergies are: eggs, milk, peanuts, seafood, shellfish, soy, tree nuts, and wheat. The most common food allergies in children are eggs, milk, peanuts, and tree nuts. Adults most commonly develop an allergy to eggs, fish, peanuts, shellfish, and tree nuts.

Symptoms of food allergies range from mild to life threatening. Symptoms may include: rash/hives, itchy skin or mouth, nausea, stomach pain, diarrhea, swelling of the airways, shortness of breath, chest pain, or anaphylaxis (a life threatening allergic reaction).

Food Intolerance

A food intolerance is a type of digestive system response. This type of response typically occurs when a person is missing a certain enzyme needed to digest a particular food or ingredient. An intolerance can also occur when the food or ingredient irritates the digestive tract. The most common types of intolerance are lactose (milk and other dairy products), gluten (wheat, rye, and barley), fructose (fruit), wheat, and yeast (most bread products). Some people have intolerance to chemical additives, such as monosodium glutamate (MSG).

Symptoms of food intolerances are often less severe than food allergies and typically involve the digestive system. Symptoms can include: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain, gas, cramping, bloating, heartburn, headaches, and irritability.

How to Tell the Difference

Food allergies are triggered every time the particular food or ingredient is eaten. People with severe allergies can experience symptoms just by coming into contact with the food. For example, people with severe peanut allergies can develop a rash if they are touched by someone with traces of peanut butter on their hands. Your doctor can either run a skin-prick test or a blood test to determine if you have a food allergy.

With food intolerances, food must be eaten in order for symptoms to occur. Food intolerances are often dose dependent, meaning that people with an intolerance can endure a certain amount of a particular food or ingredient before they experience symptoms. For example, some people with lactose intolerance may be able to tolerate yogurt because it contains less lactose than other dairy products. Certain food intolerances, such as lactose or gluten, may be verified if the tests are available. Elimination diets are often used to determine food sensitivity. An elimination diet is a method of identifying foods that an individual cannot consume without unfavorable symptoms.

Treatment

Unfortunately, there is not a medication that prevents allergic reactions for food. People with food allergies need to avoid their trigger foods at all times. The tiniest amount of the intolerable food or ingredient can trigger an allergic reaction. It is important to be aware of hidden ingredients and the risk of cross-contamination of food. People with food allergies should also work with their doctor, allergist, and dietitian to develop a healthy meal plan and strategies to reduce the risk of accidental exposure to food allergies. People with severe allergic reactions may be prescribed medication to reduce the risk of anaphylaxis.

People with food intolerances should work with their doctor and dietitian who can assist in identifying which foods trigger symptoms. Developing a healthful meal plan with a dietitian can increase awareness of trigger foods and hidden ingredients.

If you experience symptoms related to certain foods, it is important to inform your doctor. They can help you to determine if it is a food allergy or intolerance.