

Food Allergies—Take Them Seriously

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Health Focus Contributor

Food allergies are becoming increasingly common, with prevalence among children doubling over the past two decades. While they still affect only about four percent of the population, these allergies cause considerable anxiety for patients and their families.

Many Americans experience unpleasant side effects from digesting certain foods—an upset stomach, bloating, gas or mild diarrhea. These reactions do not constitute an allergy but rather a food sensitivity or sometimes a food aversion.

A true food allergy is an abnormal response triggered by the immune system. Symptoms may include an itching or tingling in the mouth, swelling of the tongue and throat, hives, difficulty breathing, wheezing, vomiting, abdominal cramps, a drop in blood pressure and even loss of consciousness or death—occurring within minutes or as long as two hours after eating the offending food.

Allergic reactions send about 300,000 Americans to the emergency room each year and are implicated in about 150 deaths. There are other reasons for any of these symptoms; see a doctor for an examination and testing.

About 90 percent of allergies are to peanuts, tree nuts, cow's milk, eggs, wheat, soybeans, shellfish and fish. The process starts when a predisposed person consumes food containing the allergen. The person's immune system responds by producing an antibody that then attacks the offending substance on later occasions when the food is eaten.

For the person with the food allergy, the world around is fraught with danger. Taking the nuts off the top of a piece of carrot cake is no solution; the cake below has been contaminated.

A new law went into effect at the beginning of 2006 requiring products to state clearly if the food includes even trace amounts of the common allergens. What the law does, more than anything else, is to put the idea of food allergies more prominently in front of the public. Since there is presently no cure, the only treatment is to avoid the offending food.

Allergic reactions are most common when the person is eating outside the home. The patient is advised to avoid buffets and salad bars, where cross contamination is possible. If you're cooking for

someone with a food allergy, pay attention to all the ingredients you use. Make sure your pans, knives and cutting surfaces offer no chance for cross contamination.

The ultimate solution is to prevent the development of food allergies, and that would be simpler if scientists could explain the recent increase. Food allergies are rare in third world countries and increasingly prevalent in the developed world. One reason may be greater awareness, but some believe that cleanliness may also be a factor. According to this theory, immune systems that are consistently challenged are better able to function than those dealing daily with a sterile, antibacterial environment. Many European doctors believe in exposing babies to healthy probiotic bacteria in order to strengthen the immune system. At present, U.S. regulations forbid the use of probiotics in infant formula.

Allergies tend to run in families, and current advice for pregnant women with a family history of allergies is to avoid eating certain foods during the last trimester and while breast-feeding the baby. Breast feeding is recommended as a way to reduce the risk of food allergies, and parents are advised not to introduce solid foods too early—particularly nuts, seeds, wheat, cow’s milk, fish, shellfish or eggs.

Vitamin supplements, given during the first six months, have also been implicated in the development of food allergies. One study published in *Pediatrics* [July, 2004] found an association between supplements and food allergies—particularly in formula-fed babies.

There is clearly much to learn about food allergies, but an important first step is recognizing the danger. Food allergies are real, and 11 million Americans have one. On the other hand, six or seven times that number believe they have a food allergy, sometimes putting themselves at risk of dietary deficiencies by eliminating whole classes of foods.

If you’re concerned about your reaction to certain foods, see a doctor. If you know someone who has a diagnosed food allergy, do your best to offer support and protection.

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