



Eat Well, Live Well

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Step Right Up

to Healthy Eating

Food Allergy and Food Intolerances – What's the Difference?



For most people, food is a source of pleasure, as well as nourishment. For those with food allergy or food intolerance, however, eating can also be frustrating and stressful.

What is food allergy?

Many foreign compounds come into the body when food is eaten. Some, such as germs, are harmful, while others, such as nutrients, are helpful. The immune system, or disease fighting system, must decide which compounds are harmful and then try to protect the body against them. Food allergy results when the immune system decides that a protein in a food is harmful, and begins an attack when that food enters the body.

The most common food allergies are: peanuts, tree nuts (such as almonds and walnuts), sesame seeds, milk, eggs, seafood (fish, crustaceans and shellfish), soy, wheat and sulphites (a food additive).

The most common symptoms of food allergy are:

- Skin problems (example: hives; tissue swelling – especially of the face and around the mouth; itching and reddening of the skin; and eczema in young children)
- Breathing problems (example: stuffy, runny nose and itchy eyes; worsening of asthma in asthmatics)
- Digestion problems (example: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea)
- The most severe allergic response is anaphylaxis, which may involve all of the above symptoms and can be life threatening.

What is food Intolerance?

Unlike food allergy, food intolerance does NOT involve the immune system. Many food intolerances are caused by inadequate digestion, absorption, and/or processing of the food when it is eaten. As a result, unwanted food materials may build up, and have a harmful effect. Symptoms of food intolerance depend on the amount of the offending food eaten – the more you eat, the worse the symptoms tend to be. Lactose intolerance is an example of a food intolerance.



Milk allergy and lactose intolerance

Milk allergy and lactose intolerance are examples of food allergy and food intolerance to what seems to be the same food; yet the two are very different:

During a milk allergic reaction, the immune system (disease fighting system) reacts to the *proteins* in milk by releasing allergy chemicals. Even small amounts of milk protein can trigger an allergic reaction. The symptoms usually appear very quickly and can affect the skin, digestion and breathing. If you are milk allergic, you must avoid all milk and milk containing products and must replace the valuable nutrients in milk, such as calcium, from other sources.

Lactose intolerance is caused by the sugar in milk (lactose). Symptoms only occur in the digestive system. Stomach upset, and sometimes diarrhea, start anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours after a person eats or drinks lactose. Everyone has different amounts of the enzyme lactase, which is needed to break down lactose. If you eat more lactose than the amount of lactase enzyme available, some of the lactose will not be broken down. The leftover lactose causes bloating, gas and diarrhea.

Tips to help you manage food allergies and intolerances for yourself or your family.

- ✓ Be sure – get a diagnosis. If you think you have a bad reaction to a food, see a doctor.
- ✓ If food allergy or intolerance is suspected, it's important that the offending food is *accurately* identified so you can avoid **ONLY** the food that causes the symptom.

Dietitians provide food and nutrition information you can trust. Find a dietitian in your area at www.dietitians.ca/find or call 1-888-901-7776.

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- ✓ If you must remove a food from your normal eating, explore other available foods that have the same nutrients as those you are avoiding. For example, if you are allergic to milk, you must find other ways to replace the nutrients in milk such as calcium and Vitamin D.
- ✓ Get the facts from a trusted source. A registered dietitian can help you manage food allergy and food intolerance. Visit www.dietitians.ca/find
- ✓ Read the ingredient list for items that are in the food. Learn the alternative names for the food item you are trying to avoid. For example, 'casein' and "whey" are names for milk proteins.
- ✓ Home-prepared foods may be easier than packaged foods because you know and can control what goes into the food.
- ✓ Food allergies and intolerances can change over the life cycle. Regular physical check-ups are important to be sure that you are eating all the food you can and not eliminating any foods you don't have to.
- ✓ Living with food allergy and food intolerance can be challenging. Knowledgeable health care professionals and advocacy groups can provide support and guidance. Changing the food you eat may seem difficult at first, but with patience, these changes will become second nature.

Further Information

Anaphylaxis Network of Canada
www.anaphylaxis.org

Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA)
www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/labeti/allerg/allerge.shtml

The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network
www.foodallergy.org

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