

Food Allergy

What is a food allergy?

Normally, the immune system is able to protect the body from a disease or problem. When you have a food allergy, some foods can cause the immune system to make a mistake and treat a food like something that is harmful.

The immune system releases chemicals in the body that cause the symptoms of an allergic reaction. About 1 of every 10 children has a food allergy.

What is food intolerance?

Food intolerance is different from a food allergy.

- Involves the digestive system, not the immune system.
- Normally causes a less severe reaction than a food allergy.

Ask your doctor if you think your child has a food allergy or intolerance.

Most food allergies are caused by: milk, soy, wheat, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish.

What are the symptoms of a food allergy?

Symptoms may occur in just a few minutes or up to several hours after eating a food.

- Problems breathing or wheezing
- Swollen lips, throat, tongue, or eyes
- Hives
- Itching
- Stomach cramps
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Eczema

Anaphylaxis is the most serious allergic reaction because it can cause death. It can cause the airways to swell, making it hard to breathe. It also may cause a sudden drop in blood pressure. That means less oxygen reaches the brain and other vital organs. It can happen in a few minutes or up to a few hours after the food has been given. It does not happen often, but is very important to watch and be prepared for. **Epinephrine must be given for Anaphylaxis.**

How are food allergies diagnosed?

Your child's doctor will take a complete history and do a physical exam to decide if allergy testing is needed. Skin prick tests and blood tests, called serum specific IgE tests, may be done.

How is a reaction treated?

There are 2 medicines that can be used to treat an allergic reaction.

- **Antihistamines** are normally used for less severe reactions.
- **Epinephrine** is the only medicine that will stop a severe allergic reaction, such as anaphylaxis.

Work with your doctor on an Emergency Care Plan for your child. This plan tells you when to use each type of medicine. You can find an emergency care plan online at:

<http://www.foodallergy.org/faap>.

How can I keep my child safe?

The only way to avoid an allergic reaction is to strictly avoid the food your child is allergic to. To protect your child, follow these tips:

- Inform other caregivers of the food allergies.
- Have an Emergency Care Plan in place.
- If the food allergy is new to you, talk with a registered dietitian or allergist. Ask them to teach you how to read food labels. Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) has information about how to read food labels.
- Read the food labels of all foods before giving them to your child. Do not rely on the allergy statement. Be sure to **read the food label every time you buy the food, because the ingredients may change.**
- Unpackaged foods might not list ingredients. **Be sure to get information about ingredients and how these foods are made.**
- Avoid cross-contamination or cross-contact with other foods. A safe food may get contaminated from a food your child is allergic to if the foods touch. Use separate silverware for your child's safe foods. Always wash counters, tables, and hands. Use caution if buying foods from high risk areas, such as bakeries, delis, and restaurants.
- Carry 2 epinephrine pens at all times in case of a reaction. School / daycare may require 2 pens be stored there. Make sure your epinephrine pens are not expired. Epinephrine pens that are expired may not work as well, but should be given if it is all you have.
- Have your child wear medical identification.
- Have safe food and snacks on hand if you are travelling or eating at a restaurant.
- If you are not sure if a food is safe for your child, do not give it.

How do these allergies affect my child's nutrition?

Your child's diet may be limited because of a food allergy. This is especially true if your child is allergic to more than one food. When this happens, your child may get nutrition that is not balanced. Poor nutrition can affect your child's growth and development. It can also lead to health problems.

A dietitian can help you learn about safe foods and nutrition supplements for your child. A dietitian will also give you guidelines for food and nutrients your child needs to grow and develop properly. Ask your healthcare provider if your child should work with a dietitian.

Where can I get more information?

Food Allergy Research & Education (FARE) www.foodallergy.org

Medical Identification Teaching Sheet

www.chw.org medical care → teaching sheets → medical ID

References:

www.foodallergy.org → *Food Allergy Facts and Statistics* by FARE

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any concerns or if:

- You think your child may have a food allergy.
- Your child has special health care needs not covered by this information.

This teaching sheet is meant to help you care for your child. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.