

Family Friendly Factsheets!

Allergies



Food allergies are a common problem which affect approximately one in four people in Britain with almost half of those affected being children. Allergies in children can be a controversial issue and there is much confusion about diagnosis, diet changes and when and how to introduce those foods which may trigger an allergy.

What is an allergy?

An allergy is described as developing a sensitivity to a substance which in itself is not necessarily harmful. Sensitivities can be to food, pollen or dust. An allergy is characterised by the production of an immune response in your body which fights off this substance which your body reacts too. This response can be minor or severe and can cause the sufferer great misery.

What causes Allergies?

Allergic reactions are caused by substances in the environment called allergens. Common allergens include pollen, house dust mites, pets, household chemicals, drugs or medicine and of course food. 90% of Food allergies are caused by the 'Big Eight' which are:

1. Milk
2. Eggs
3. Peanuts
4. Other Nuts
5. Fish
6. Shellfish
7. Soya
8. Wheat

Children most commonly experience allergic reactions to milk, peanuts, nuts, eggs, Soya and wheat. Fortunately most children grow out of most types of food allergy in early childhood.

Who is likely to incur allergies?

We don't know exactly why some people have food allergies and others don't. One commonly suggested reason is genetics which suggests that allergic parents are more likely to have allergic children. In turn these children will have stronger allergies than those children of non-allergic parents.

Some food allergy sufferers often have the tendency to suffer from more than one food allergy especially in foods that have similar structures such as peanuts, Soya, peas and beans, and as a result these can cause similar allergic reactions.

Allergic responses and symptoms

Our bodies immune reaction in response to allergens such as eggs or peanuts leads to the further release of chemicals within the body which cause the symptoms of an allergic reaction. Symptoms can include: runny nose, itchy eyes, sneezing, wheezing, asthma, eczema, diarrhoea, tightening of the airway and rashes. The rate and severity of the response can be minor or severe. Symptoms can appear within minutes or hours; delayed responses are usually linked to intolerance rather than allergy.

Diagnosis and Testing

There are a number of methods for allergy testing including:

- *Skin Testing* – assesses the bodies' immune reaction by introducing small amounts of the suspected allergens to monitor the allergic response.
- *Blood Testing* – measures the amount of chemicals in the blood which are released due to a response to allergens.

Anaphylaxis / Anaphylactic Shock

Those with severe allergies can experience anaphylactic reactions which describes the experiencing of different symptoms at the same time. In the UK peanuts, milk, eggs and fish are the most common foods to cause anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis can be fatal if it isn't treated immediately, usually with an injection of adrenaline, hence why it is vital for someone with a severe allergy to always carry their medication.



Living with allergies

Many children with food allergies grow out of them however allergies to peanuts, nuts, fish and shellfish usually remain for life. Unfortunately there is no cure for food allergies hence the only way to avoid an allergic reaction is to avoid foods containing the allergen you are sensitive to. A balanced and varied diet is essential for good health so it is sensible to arrange a consultation with a GP or dietician who will be able to guide you in making informed food choices for your child which won't result in further diet related problems. Some GP's will also be able to prescribe 'allergen free' foods which could increase diet variety and save you the cost of buying expensive specialist ingredients.

Suffers really should try not to let their allergy affect the quality of their diet. Freezing foods will allow a greater variety of diet without the time constraints of cooking daily. Planning ahead for special events i.e. Birthdays and Christmas will help avoid any unwanted reactions. Keeping 'safe' snacks readily at hand will avoid any problems of being caught short and hungry!

Friends, Family, Schools and First Aiders should all be informed of your child's food allergy and should know what to look out for if buying food or what to do in the event of an allergic reaction.

When buying food it is essential to check the Food Label, Ingredients List and Allergy Statement Box. Current legislation requires that all pre-packed foods must clearly state on the label if a food contains an allergen. If foods are produced on the same factory line as a recognised allergen a 'may contain...' label can be included on the packaging.

Rules for eating out

When eating out there are a number of golden rules to avoid any unwanted reactions.

- Tell the restaurant or café about your child's allergy
- Check with the chef that the meal your child wants to order is safe to eat
- Watch out for hidden ingredients, just because you can't see the food doesn't mean it's not there think about wheat in sauces and nuts in cakes

Helping your child

- Teach children from a young age about coping with allergies to help them feel supported
- Role play can be useful for children to help them know what to do in everyday situations i.e. shopping and saying no to sharing foods with their friends
- Why not start an allergen free garden, it may help your child to understand more about food and where food comes from making them more aware of what they need to look out for
- Proving schools with 'safe snacks' will allow your child's inclusion in all activities and situations
- Ensure party organisers are aware of your child's allergy and be prepared to offer to help catering or provide a packed lunch
- Try not to be over-anxious as you can cause your child to feel high negatively about their condition which can worsen their ability to cope
- Support groups will allow your child to talk about their allergies in a safe environment and they will meet other children suffering from similar problems helping them to feel less isolated

Further Information

For further information about allergies visit:

- www.eatwell.gov.uk
- www.allergyuk.org