



Managing Food Allergies: What You Need to Know

Food allergies are serious, but you can manage them with help from your allergist and others. This information will help you learn more about the disease so that you can be prepared, stay safe and live well with food allergies.

What Is a Food Allergy?

A food allergy is when your body's immune system reacts to a food protein because it has mistaken that food protein as a threat.

The food you are allergic to is called a "food allergen." The response your body has to the food is called an "allergic reaction."

People can be allergic to any food, but eight foods cause most food allergy reactions in the U.S. They are: milk, egg, peanuts, tree nuts (such as walnuts or pecans), wheat, soy, fish, and shellfish (such as lobster, shrimp or crab).

What Is the Difference Between a Food Allergy and a Food Intolerance?

Unlike a food intolerance, food allergies involve the immune system and can be life-threatening. With a food allergy, your immune system makes too much of an antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE). IgE antibodies fight the "threatening" food allergens by releasing histamine and other chemicals. This chemical release causes the symptoms of an allergic reaction.

A food intolerance is when your body has trouble digesting a food. It can make you feel badly, usually with an upset stomach or gassiness, but it is not life-threatening. The most common intolerance is to lactose, which is a natural sugar found in milk.

Are Allergic Reactions Serious?

Yes. Allergic reactions can range from mild to very serious. The most dangerous reaction is called anaphylaxis (pronounced an-uh-fil-LAX-is). Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that happens quickly and may cause death.

Anaphylaxis can affect several areas of the body. It can make it hard to breathe and make it hard for your body to circulate blood. The first-line treatment for anaphylaxis is a medicine called epinephrine.

Carefully avoiding problem foods is the only way to prevent allergic reactions.

Not All Reactions Are the Same!

You can still have a life-threatening reaction to your problem food, even if you have never had a serious reaction before. Past reactions do not predict future reactions!



Avoid Problem Foods

Even a trace amount of a problem food can cause a serious reaction. Learn how to find your problem foods in both obvious and unexpected places.

- **Read every label, every time.** Ingredients in packaged foods may change without warning. Check ingredient statements every time you shop. Even the same product from the same company can have different warning labels. If you have questions, call the manufacturer.

Federal law requires packaged food labels to list when one of the top eight food allergens is an intended ingredient. The top eight food allergens are: milk, egg, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish, and shellfish. Read more about this law and tips for avoiding unintended ingredients at www.foodallergy.org/food-labels.

- **Be mindful of cross-contact.** Cross-contact happens when a food that is an allergen comes into contact with a safe food and their proteins mix. As a result, each food contains small amounts of the other food. These amounts are so small that they usually can't be seen. One example of cross-contact is when the same utensil is used to serve a food that contains an allergen and a safe food.

Cross-contact can happen in restaurants, school cafeterias, home kitchens, or anywhere that an allergen may be present. Get more tips for avoiding cross-contact at www.foodallergy.org/cross-contact.



Plan Ahead

No matter how hard you try to avoid food allergens, accidents will happen. These simple steps go a long way in being prepared for an allergic reaction.

1. **Always carry your epinephrine auto-injector.** Epinephrine is the only medicine that can stop life-threatening reactions. Carry your epinephrine auto-injector with you at all times and check to make sure it has not expired, is kept at a safe temperature, and that it has not been damaged.
2. **Fill out a Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan with your allergist.** These plans tell you and/or those who care for your child how to recognize and respond to an allergic reaction. Sample plans can be downloaded from FARE's website in both English and Spanish (www.foodallergy.org/downloads).
3. **Know your plan and share it with others.** Make sure everyone who knows you understands what to do in case of an emergency. Keep your Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan in a place where others can find it. For parents, give your child's plan and medicines to their school or preschool as soon as possible.
4. **Wear medical identification.** Medical IDs will help protect you or your loved one—at home or wherever you may be during an emergency.

Safety First!

Never take a chance by trying "just a bite" of a food that may contain your allergen. Even a tiny amount can put your life at risk.





Recognize & Treat a Reaction

Seconds matter! It is important to be able to quickly recognize and treat an allergic reaction. Work with your allergist to know what to look for and how to respond. Have them fill out a Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan for you.

What will a reaction look like?

Food allergy reactions are hard to predict. The last reaction a person had could look nothing like the next one.

The first symptoms usually appear between a few minutes and two hours after exposure to a food allergen, but they can also begin later.

Symptoms can affect many different parts of the body. The symptoms can be mild (itchy nose or a few hives), but they can also be severe (trouble breathing, repetitive vomiting, weak pulse, etc.). Find a complete list of symptoms at www.foodallergy.org/symptoms.

In some food allergy reactions, after the first symptoms go away, a second wave of symptoms can start one to four hours later. This is called a biphasic reaction.

How do I treat an allergic reaction to food?

Anaphylaxis should always be treated with an injection of epinephrine. Antihistamines can be used to relieve mild allergy symptoms, but they cannot control anaphylaxis, and they should never be given as a substitute for epinephrine. Mild symptoms can quickly turn into a life-threatening reaction. Anyone having a reaction to a food allergen should be monitored closely.



Give Epinephrine for a Serious Reaction

Epinephrine is a type of adrenaline. It helps reverse the symptoms of a severe reaction. It is considered a very safe medicine. There are currently three types of epinephrine auto-injectors available in the U.S. Have your doctor train you to use the device you want and practice with a trainer (a device that does not have a needle or medicine in it). Instructions for using each auto-injector and more information is available at www.foodallergy.org/epinephrine.





After Using Epinephrine

After you use an epinephrine auto-injector:

- 1. Call 911 immediately!** An epinephrine auto-injector buys time, but it is important to receive follow-up treatment as soon as possible. An ambulance can provide treatment on the way to the hospital.
- Tell the 911 operator:
 - Epinephrine has been given for a suspected food allergy reaction.
 - Send an ambulance that has epinephrine on board.
- Lay the person flat and raise their legs. If their breathing is difficult or they are vomiting, have them sit up or lie on their side.
- If symptoms do not get better, or symptoms return, more doses of epinephrine can be given about 5 minutes or more after the last dose.
- Have the ambulance take the person to the Emergency Room. They should stay there for at least 4 hours to make sure symptoms do not return.

You will also need to make a follow-up appointment with an allergist as soon as possible. Be sure to:

- Bring the used epinephrine auto-injector(s) to be safely thrown away.
- Describe how the reaction happened.
- Get a prescription to replace your used auto-injector(s).

Three Important Things You Should Know

- 1) Allergic reactions are unpredictable. How severe the reaction is, and which symptoms you get, can change from one reaction to the next.**
- 2) It's vital to always carry your epinephrine auto-injector with you. In the case of severe reaction, minutes can make a difference.**
- 3) Know the possible symptoms of an allergic reaction, and know how and when to use your epinephrine auto-injector.**

