

LEARNING ABOUT ALLERGIES

GENERAL

WHAT IS A FOOD ALLERGY?



A food allergy is a reaction to a substance in a food – usually a protein – which causes an allergic reaction. The substance that causes the reaction is known as an allergen. The most common food allergies are to peanuts, nuts, fish, shellfish, lactose (the sugar found naturally in milk) and cow's milk, eggs, soy products, sesame and wheat. Symptoms to food allergies may include stomach upsets, rashes, itching of the skin or mouth, swelling of the throat and breathing difficulties. In some cases food allergies can be life threatening; sufferers need to be really vigilant about checking food labels (see below).

WHAT IS A FOOD INTOLERANCE?



A food intolerance is an inability to digest certain types of foods. This happens when something in a food irritates a person's digestive system and they are unable to properly digest or break down the food. Two of the most common food intolerances are to lactose and wheat. Having a food intolerance isn't life-threatening, but if you don't adjust your diet you may suffer from general poor health, skin problems and also gain weight that is hard to shift.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ALLERGENS?

In the UK, the list of allergens is regularly updated. Allergen lists vary from country to country. In the UK, the current list of known allergens is as follows: celery, cereals containing gluten (including wheat, rye, barley and oats), crustaceans, eggs, fish, lupin (related to legumes such as peanuts, peas, lentils and beans), milk, molluscs, mustard, nuts, peanuts, sesame seeds, soya and sulphur dioxide or sulphites.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR ALLERGY ADVICE ON FOOD LABELS

Because food allergies can be serious, and even deadly, companies that intentionally use any of these known allergens in their pre-packed food have a legal requirement to list them on the label. This is usually written as 'Contains milk, nuts and shellfish', for example. And since even the tiniest trace amount of an allergen can make some people incredibly sick, companies will also warn people when their product may have come into contact with allergens by mistake. That's why you'll also see extra warnings, such as 'Produced in a factory using nuts', so look out for these too.

'FREE-FROM' FOOD

Because food allergies or intolerances are fairly common, companies such as Trufree and supermarket own-brand ranges now specialise in producing foods that are 'free-from' certain allergens. The most common 'free-from' foods are dairy-free (lactose-free milk and milk-free) chocolate bars, for example, or gluten-free (wheat-free) breads, cereals and biscuits.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU SUFFER FROM A FOOD ALLERGY

If you think you might be allergic to a certain food, it is really important that you get checked out by your doctor then follow their advice. Unfortunately, there is no cure for food allergies; the only way to stay safe is to avoid the foods that you are allergic to. But if you read food labels carefully and look for 'free-from' alternatives, you shouldn't feel like you're missing out at all.

ALLERGEN WEBSITES

For loads of helpful general information about all kinds of allergies. check out:

www.allergyuk.org

For specific information and advice on each of the common food allergies and intolerances, have a look at the directory from the FSA:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/food-allergy/Pages/Intro1.aspx