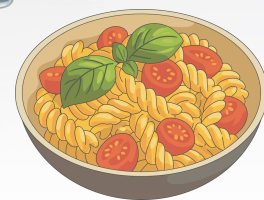




Food Allergies

A Practical Guide for Patients



What this guide covers

- **What a food allergy is** and how it differs from a food intolerance.
- **Common and severe symptoms** to watch out for after eating.
- **When a food allergy becomes a medical emergency** and how to respond.
- **How doctors test for and diagnose** a food allergy.
- **Practical daily life tips** for managing food allergies at home, at work, and while traveling.
- **Answers to common questions** to help you navigate living with a food allergy.

What a food allergy is

A food allergy happens when your body's immune system reacts to a specific food as if it were a harmful threat. Your immune system overreacts to the proteins in that food, leading to an allergic reaction. These reactions can range from very mild to very serious. While people can be allergic to any food, the foods that most commonly cause these reactions include cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, and shellfish.

It is very important to understand that a food allergy is different from a food intolerance. A food intolerance is a non-immunological reaction, meaning it does not involve the body's immune system. Food intolerance often causes digestive discomfort, such as bloating or tummy pain, and these symptoms usually appear a few hours after eating the food.

In contrast, the most common type of severe food allergy involves specific immune antibodies called Immunoglobulin E, or IgE. IgE-mediated food allergies typically trigger symptoms very quickly, often within minutes to an hour of eating the offending food.

Common signs and symptoms

Symptoms of a food allergy can affect any part of your body and can vary greatly from person to person. You may experience symptoms in different parts of your body at the exact same time.

Mild to Moderate Symptoms:

- Itchy skin, redness, or a raised rash known as hives.
- Swelling of the lips, face, and the area around the eyes.
- An itchy or tingling sensation in the mouth and oral cavity.
- Sneezing, a runny nose, or a blocked nose.
- Red, itchy, or watery eyes.
- Feeling sick (nausea), being sick (vomiting), or experiencing stomach cramps.
- Diarrhoea.

More Severe Symptoms:

- Coughing, wheezing, noisy breathing, or a hoarse voice.
- Shortness of breath, chest tightness, or struggling to breathe.
- Swelling of the tongue or throat, or a feeling that your throat is tight.
- Feeling suddenly dizzy, lightheaded, or fainting.
- When it may be an emergency Some allergic reactions can quickly escalate into a medical emergency. A severe, life-threatening allergic reaction is called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis requires immediate medical attention because it can severely affect your breathing and heart.

Call emergency services immediately if you or someone else experiences any of the following red-flag symptoms:

- Sudden swelling of the lips, mouth, throat, or tongue.
- Breathing very fast, struggling to breathe, wheezing, or gasping for air.
- A tight throat or difficulty swallowing.
- Skin, tongue, or lips turning blue, grey, or pale (on black or brown skin, check the palms of the hands or the soles of the feet).
- Sudden confusion, severe drowsiness, or dizziness.
- Fainting or collapsing and not being able to be woken up.

If you have been prescribed an adrenaline auto-injector (such as an EpiPen), you should use it immediately at the very first sign of a severe reaction. Always call for an ambulance after using the injector, even if you or the person you are with seems to be feeling better.

How doctors assess or diagnose it

If you suspect you have a food allergy, your doctor will start by taking a detailed allergy-focused clinical history. The doctor will ask about the specific foods you eat, the exact symptoms you experienced, how much of the food you ate, and how quickly the symptoms started after eating. They will also ask if you have any family history of allergies, asthma, or eczema. Keeping a food and symptoms diary can be incredibly helpful for this visit.

Based on your history, the doctor may recommend specific tests to confirm the allergy. You can expect some of the following possible tests:

- **Skin-prick test:** A tiny drop of liquid containing the suspected food allergen is placed on your skin, usually your forearm or back. The doctor then gently pricks the skin through the drop to see if a small, itchy bump appears within 15 minutes. This test must always be done in a clinic equipped to handle allergic reactions safely.
- **Blood tests:** These tests measure the amount of specific allergy antibodies (IgE) in your blood. This helps show if your immune system is highly sensitive to a certain food.
- **Elimination diet:** You may be asked to completely stop eating the suspected food for two to six weeks to see if your symptoms improve.
- **Oral food challenge:** If skin and blood tests are not perfectly clear, you might undergo an oral food challenge. This involves eating gradually increasing amounts of the suspected food under strict medical supervision in a hospital or clinic, where staff will safely monitor you for any reaction.
- **Treatment and management** Currently, the main treatment for a food allergy is the strict and complete avoidance of the food that triggers your reaction. You must not eat the food you are allergic to, including any products where it is used as an invisible ingredient.

If an accidental exposure happens, you will need to be prepared with a treatment plan and emergency medicines provided by your doctor.

- **For mild reactions:** Your doctor may recommend antihistamine medicines to help relieve symptoms like itching or mild hives.
- **For severe reactions:** Adrenaline (epinephrine) is the most important emergency medicine for treating anaphylaxis. It is usually prescribed as an easy-to-use adrenaline auto-injector.

Some patients may be eligible for allergen-specific immunotherapy. This treatment involves taking tiny, gradually increasing amounts of the allergen under strict medical supervision to help the immune system become less sensitive over time. Because of the risks involved, this is a specialized treatment that should only be done in clinics with extensive experience. Additionally, a medication called omalizumab has been suggested to help treat IgE-mediated food allergies and raise the amount of food you can tolerate before reacting, though it is not a cure.

Daily life tips

Living with a food allergy requires careful planning and attention, but it can absolutely be managed safely. Here is practical advice for daily life:

Read food labels carefully: Always check the ingredient lists on packaged foods before you eat them. Major allergens like milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, and shellfish must be clearly highlighted on food labels in many regions. Pay close attention to advisory warnings like "may contain trace amounts".

Avoid cross-contact at home: Make sure to wash utensils, cutting boards, and kitchen surfaces thoroughly to prevent small amounts of the allergen from transferring into safe foods.

Eating out safely: When dining out, clearly tell the restaurant staff, waitstaff, and the chef about your allergy. Ask about the ingredients in your meal, including sauces and beverages, and ask how the food is prepared to avoid cross-contamination in the kitchen. Bakeries and buffets carry a particularly high risk for cross-contamination.

Be prepared when travelling: Bring your own safe snacks when traveling. Tell airlines and cabin staff about your allergy before you board your flight, and preboard the aircraft to wipe down your seat area if possible.

Always carry your medicines: Carry your emergency medicines and a copy of your written allergy action plan with you at all times, whether you are at work, school, or traveling.

Communicate clearly: Tell your friends, family, coworkers, and your child's school about the allergy so they can support you and know exactly what to do in an emergency.

Common questions and myths

Can I outgrow my food allergy? Many children outgrow allergies to cow's milk, eggs, soy, and wheat by adolescence. However, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish are much more likely to persist and be lifelong.

If I am allergic to a raw fruit, am I also allergic to it when it is cooked? Some people have "oral allergy syndrome," where they experience an itchy mouth and throat after eating certain raw fruits and vegetables. Because cooking destroys the specific proteins that cause this cross-reaction, most people with this syndrome can safely eat the cooked or baked forms of these foods.

Is a food allergy the same as a food intolerance? No. A food allergy involves the immune system and can cause severe, life-threatening reactions very quickly. A food intolerance does not involve the immune system, is generally not life-threatening, and mostly causes digestive discomfort hours after eating.

Can just smelling the food cause a severe reaction? Most IgE-mediated allergic reactions occur only after actually eating the food. However, inhaling particles from cooking aerosols can occasionally trigger symptoms in highly sensitive individuals, though it is much less common.

Should I take antihistamines before my adrenaline auto-injector in an emergency? No. For severe reactions or anaphylaxis, adrenaline must be given immediately. Antihistamines can help mild symptoms but should never replace or delay the use of adrenaline for a severe reaction.

When to contact a doctor

While severe reactions require immediate emergency services, there are other times you should seek non-emergency medical advice:

If you or your child develop new symptoms after eating a food and you suspect a new food allergy has developed.

If you need to renew your prescription for your adrenaline auto-injectors, or if you notice your current injectors have expired.

If you want to review and update your written allergy management plan.

If you need a referral to a registered dietitian to ensure your diet remains nutritionally balanced while strictly avoiding certain foods.

If the anxiety of living with a food allergy is significantly affecting your quality of life or mental health, as your doctor may refer you to helpful psychological support services.

Key points to remember

Food allergies happen when your immune system reacts to specific foods, and reactions can range from mild to life-threatening.

Strict avoidance of your trigger food is the most effective way to prevent an allergic reaction.

Anaphylaxis is a severe medical emergency; call for an ambulance immediately if someone has trouble breathing, a tight throat, or sudden swelling.

Always carry your prescribed emergency medicine, such as your adrenaline auto-injectors, with you everywhere you go.

Read food labels every single time you shop, and always clearly inform restaurant staff of your allergy when eating out.

Do not experiment by cutting major foods out of your diet without speaking to a healthcare professional, as you may miss out on important nutrients.

Sources used

This guide is based on a collection of evidence-based resources, including clinical guidelines from the European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology (EAACI), the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), the UK National Health Service (NHS), peer-reviewed medical articles from StatPearls, and established patient information leaflets on food allergy testing and management.