

# FOOD SAFETY: COMMON ALLERGIES AND DEADLY REACTIONS

Have you ever felt ill shortly after eating something and wonder, "Maybe I'm allergic to what I ate?" Chances are, you are not. You may be intolerant of certain foods and suffer from gastrointestinal distress, but true food allergies only affect about 1 to 3 percent of adults, and about 3 to 8 percent of children.

However, if you ARE allergic --- and some 11 million Americans have food allergies of varying degrees of severity --- it is a very serious matter. It is important that people with true food allergies identify them and avoid the food in question. Otherwise, they face devastating illness or even a fatal reaction.

## **What is a Food Allergy?**

A food allergy is the immune system responding to a food that the body mistakenly believes is harmful. That response is to create specific antibodies to the food, and the next time it is eaten, the immune system releases chemicals to try to protect the body. But these chemicals trigger allergic symptoms that can harm the skin, joints, or the digestive, respiratory, cardiovascular or nervous systems.

## **Unfriendly Foods**

While any food can cause allergies, eight types of food cause 90 percent of all food allergic reactions.

They are:

Eggs

Fish

Milk

Shellfish

Soy

Peanuts

Tree nuts (walnut, pecan, etc.)

Wheat

In children, the most common food allergies are associated with eggs, milk, and peanuts. Adults generally don't lose food allergies, but children may outgrow them.

## **Treatment**

If you are diagnosed with a food allergy, treatment essentially consists of removing the problem food from your diet.

Carefully read the ingredient lists --- required on labels by the Food and Drug Administration --- for anything you are considering eating. When eating out, ask if the dish you would like to order is prepared with any ingredients to which you are allergic.

Patients with severe food allergies should wear medical alert bracelets or necklaces stating that they have a food allergy and that they are subject to severe reactions.

## **Fending Off Danger Foods**

You must know how to protect people from foods to which they are allergic and how to manage them if they consume a food to which they are allergic, including the administration of epinephrine.

There are many substitutes for foods that don't agree with you, such as wheat-free breads and pastas and milks made from soy, rice, oats or almonds. A nonprofit organization, the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network ([www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org)), provides education, advocacy and support for those with food allergies.

-- *Kenneth Krause*

