



Canadian Health Network

Health info for every body

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I think I have a food allergy: what should I do?

If you think that you or a family member has a food allergy, check first with your doctor. Most food allergies start in early childhood. However, most children outgrow many of their food allergies after a few years.

A sudden appearance of food allergy symptoms in an adult, especially if the symptoms are severe, is unusual. Other causes for the symptoms must be ruled out before labelling the problem a food allergy.

If your doctor agrees that the cause of your symptoms could be food, it's important to find out exactly which food or foods are the problem. You shouldn't stop eating certain foods unless you're sure that you need to. If you avoid foods that contain important nutrients, you might put yourself at risk of nutrient deficiencies, and might get sick.

Only a few foods cause most food allergies

Most reactions to foods are caused by the following foods and products made from them:

- peanuts
- tree nuts (almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts (filberts), macadamia nuts, pecans, pinenuts, pistachios, walnuts)
- sesame seeds
- milk
- eggs
- fish, crustaceans (e.g. crab, crayfish, lobster, shrimp) and shellfish (e.g. clams, mussels, oysters, scallops)
- soy
- wheat
- sulphites (food preservatives that often appear on labels as "sodium sulphite" or "potassium sulphite". Dried fruits and fresh grapes are often treated with sulphites. Sulphates are not the same, and are safe.)

In adults, reactions to food are more often caused by food intolerances rather than food allergies.

Food allergy and food intolerance

The difference between food allergy and food intolerance is the way the body reacts to the food.

- A **food allergy** occurs when the body's immune system fights the food and tries to get rid of it because it mistakenly believes that the food is a harmful invader.
- A **food intolerance** isn't caused by a response of the immune system. It's a result of the body's

inability to handle certain parts of the food.

Milk allergy and lactose intolerance are good examples of the difference between an allergy and an intolerance. The two conditions are reactions to the same food, but are caused by different parts of that food: **Milk allergy** is an immune response to *proteins* in milk, and symptoms of milk allergy can occur in many different parts of the body, such as the skin (hives) and the respiratory tract (wheezing), as well as in the digestive tract (cramps, diarrhea, nausea).

Milk intolerance is an intolerance of the *sugar* in milk. The condition is usually called **lactose intolerance**. It occurs when the body doesn't produce an enzyme called 'lactase', which means it can't digest the sugar (lactose) in milk. Lactose intolerance only causes symptoms in the digestive tract, such as diarrhea, sometimes bloating, and pain.

Other ingredients in food that may cause intolerances include:

- food additives like artificial colours, flavours or preservatives
- chemicals that may occur naturally in foods such as histamine, tyramine, or benzoates.

Get help

It can be hard to find out exactly which foods are causing your symptoms on your own. We often blame foods when we can't find any other cause for our problems, but this can lead to nutritional deficiencies and more problems in the future. Get the help of your doctor and a registered Dietitian.

- Your doctor can help you find out what condition is causing your symptoms and suggest a treatment plan. Your doctor may also refer you to an allergy specialist.
- A Dietitian can help you to develop a balanced meal plan that avoids problem foods.

Resources for consumers

[Allergy/Asthma Information Association \(AAIA\)](#)

[Allergy Safe Communities](#)

[Food Allergens – Canadian Food Inspection Agency \(CFIA\)](#)

[The Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network](#)

Resources for health intermediaries

[AllAllergy](#)

[Calgary Allergy Network](#)

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