

Basic facts about food allergies



When your immune system sees food as a threat

Here are some facts about food allergies from the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America:¹

- Nine foods cause most food allergy reactions: milk, soy, eggs, wheat, peanuts, tree nuts, sesame, fish and shellfish
- About 32 million people have food allergies in the U.S.
- Occurrences of food allergies have increased among U.S. children over the past 20 years
- Milk is the most common allergen for children, followed by egg and peanut
- Shellfish is the most common allergen for adults, followed by peanut and tree nut
- Sesame is a rising food allergy. It impacts an estimated 1 million people in the U.S. It was declared a major allergen in the U.S. in 2021.

Basic terminology that's helpful to understanding food allergies³

Antibody: Antibodies make up the core of your immune system. They're basically proteins whose purpose is to identify and neutralize antigens, which are foreign substances that can make you sick. Antibodies roam through your bloodstream looking for foreign substances that shouldn't be there. Antibodies mobilize quickly, grabbing and binding to these substances to keep them from making you sick. But occasionally, antibodies act in ways that are still a mystery to researchers. They attack substances that aren't diseases, but your body thinks they are, causing an allergic reaction.

Antigen: When the body develops an antigen response to something that isn't harmful, like peanut butter, you have an allergy. Once the body recognizes this substance as a harmful agent, it is prepared to fight it the next time it sees it. This is why you have the same, and sometimes more severe, allergic reaction each time you eat peanuts. You might think that the body would get used to the food, but, unfortunately, it keeps treating food like an intruder that has to be fought.

Histamines: These are the chemicals that your immune system makes to battle allergens, which are triggers that cause allergic responses. Histamines are stored in mast cells in your skin, lungs, nose, mouth, gut and blood. Once released, the histamines boost blood flow in the areas where the allergens are detected. This sets off a sequence of repair work by the body that, unfortunately, makes you miserable. For example, if you eat something the body views as bad for you, it will work in your gut and trigger an allergic reaction.

Anaphylaxis: This is the most severe reaction to a food allergy. Unfortunately, the symptoms and severity of allergic reactions can vary from person to person. In fact, you may even have a less severe reaction to a food allergy one day and a life-threatening reaction the next.

If you do feel, or observe someone else, having a severe allergic reaction, the important thing is to act fast. Quick treatment can mean the difference between life and death. See the list to the right for more information on recognizing allergic reactions.

What does fast response mean? Generally, it means an injection of epinephrine, which is a type of adrenaline. This is considered the most effective way to stop a severe allergic attack. If your doctor has prescribed an epinephrine auto-injector, use it immediately. But you should still go to a medical facility to be checked out to make sure that symptoms are under control. Sometimes the symptoms can return even stronger than before within a few hours, which is called biphasic anaphylaxis.⁴

An allergic reaction can result in a wide variety of symptoms and affect many different parts of the body. You should take even mild and moderate symptoms seriously. If you or a co-worker are in distress with any of the severe symptoms shown on the following page, or a combination of mild or moderate symptoms, see your healthcare provider or go to an emergency clinic immediately

Common allergy symptoms to know

Food allergy reactions can vary widely in severity. A past reaction that may be mild is not a predictor of a future allergic reaction, which may be life threatening. If you have a severe reaction, especially if you have difficulty breathing, dizziness or vomiting, don't waste any time in seeking medical attention. Things can go from bad to worse quickly. Familiarize yourself with the list of severe and mild allergy symptoms below:



Any of these severe symptoms⁵

- **Lung:** short of breath, wheezing, repetitive cough
- **Heart:** pale or blue skin, faint, weak pulse, dizzy
- **Throat:** tight, hoarse, trouble breathing/ swallowing
- **Mouth:** significant swelling of the tongue, lips
- **Skin:** many hives over body, widespread redness
- **Gut:** repetitive vomiting, severe diarrhea
- **Other:** feeling something bad is about to happen, anxiety, confusion



One or more of these mild symptoms⁵

- **Nose:** itchy/runny nose, sneezing
- **Mouth:** itchy mouth
- **Skin:** a few hives, mild itch
- **Gut:** mild nausea/discomfort

Sources:

1. Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. Allergy Facts and Figures, April 2022. Available from www.aafa.org.
2. Mayo Clinic. Food Allergy vs. Food Intolerance: What's the Difference? April 21, 2022. Available from www.mayoclinic.org.
3. WebMD. Top Allergy Terms, July 22, 2021. Available from www.webmd.com.
4. Mayo Clinic. Anaphylaxis, October 2, 2021. Available from www.mayoclinic.org.
5. Mayo Clinic. Food Allergy, December 31, 2021. Available from www.mayoclinic.org.

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