

Getting to the Bottom of Food Allergies

How to alleviate allergies and sensitivities

This month, we are happy to launch a new column on nutrition in collaboration with the **Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine (ACIM)** at the University of Arizona. Each month, we'll cover a food-related topic with help from an expert affiliated with the Center. Our debut column explores food allergies.

Diet plays a role in many health concerns, so if you have unexplained recurrent symptoms it's worth considering the possibility of a food allergy or sensitivity, says Randy Horwitz, MD, PhD, medical director of ACIM and a specialist in allergy and immunology. Although only 4 percent of Americans have true food allergies, up to 33 percent report having food sensitivities and intolerances.

ALLERGY OR SENSITIVITY?

Food allergies are immune system reactions, 90 percent of which are triggered by just eight foods: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (such as pecans), fish, shellfish, soy, and wheat. These can be severe and get worse with repeated exposure. Symptoms include nausea or cramps, itchy rashes, swelling, flushing, wheezing, or even anaphylaxis (a rapid, whole-body allergic response, which can cause fatal interference with breathing). Children sometimes outgrow food allergies, but those to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish are considered lifelong.

Food intolerances and sensitivities cause subtler symptoms that may not develop for a day or two. Most clinicians use the terms interchangeably, and no one knows exactly what causes them. An intolerance is a digestive-system reaction due to food irritation or inability to break down a food, as in lactose (milk sugar) intolerance. Food sensitivities may cause headaches, muscle and joint pain, rashes, and gastrointestinal problems. Some common culprits are milk, wheat, yeast, and corn products.

IDENTIFYING PROBLEM FOODS

Allergies are easier to recognize because the reaction usually occurs within 30 minutes of eating the food. To confirm an allergy, your doctor can do a skin-prick or blood test. Spotting sensitivities is trickier since symptoms don't appear right away and can be related to other health issues. There are no laboratory tests, and popular detection methods such as applied kinesiology aren't backed by solid research, but you can determine sensitivities on your own.

Keep a food diary. For a week, write down everything you eat and record any symptoms (including what, when, and where they occurred). Then look for associations, and don't overlook additives like dyes and MSG, pesticides, or even commercial produce washes.

Try an elimination diet. Eliminate possible triggers from your diet for two weeks. Then reintroduce them one at a time every two days and note any symptoms. For more details, see *Food Allergies and Food Intolerance* by Jonathan Brostoff, MD, and Linda Gamlin (Healing Arts Press, 2000).

TREATMENT

Avoiding problem foods is key. Read labels closely, and don't eat anything with ingredients you can't pronounce. For allergies, ask your doctor about sublingual immunotherapy (placing drops of a dilute solution of the allergen under your tongue); it's effective and safer than allergy shots, says Dr. Horwitz. If you have severe allergies, keep rescue medicines like epinephrine handy. For food sensitivities, you might tolerate a problem food better if you eat less or have it only occasionally. "Some patients with food sensitivities may benefit from probiotics," says Dr. Horwitz; allow three weeks to see improvement. Sometimes cooking a food can destroy the problematic compounds. If you react to processed foods or pesticides, opt for organics.