



# Food allergies and intolerances - what are they?



How common is food allergy? It is estimated that about 3% of adults and 6-8% of children suffer from a food allergy with 20% of the adult population 'thinking' that they have a food intolerance.

## Food Allergy



Food allergies occur when the body's immune system inappropriately acts against a protein within food-known as an allergen. Antibodies are produced as part of this response and a complex chain of events occurs leading to the release of substances such as histamine. This histamine release causes the symptoms of allergy such as eczema, asthma, rhinitis, conjunctivitis and in its most severe form - life threatening anaphylaxis.

An allergic response to food always involves the immune system and symptoms are frequently seen within minutes although some allergic reactions can have delayed symptoms. Due to the involvement of the immune system there are some clear diagnostic tests that can be used in conjunction with clinical history to diagnose a food allergy e.g. Allergen specific IgE blood tests and Skin Prick Tests. See the BDA website [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com) Food Facts: "The Truth about...food allergy and food intolerance testing" for further details.

## Food Intolerance

An 'intolerance' to food doesn't involve the immune system, is rarely life threatening and tends to occur hours or days after the food ingestion. A food intolerance is an adverse reaction to a food which occurs when our body has



an inability to digest that food successfully. The most common example being lactose intolerance where the body doesn't produce sufficient lactase - the enzyme that breakdowns lactose, the sugar found within milk.

## Common food allergens:

- ◆ Cow's milk
- ◆ Eggs
- ◆ Shellfish
- ◆ Fish
- ◆ Soya
- ◆ Peanuts
- ◆ Wheat
- ◆ Tree nuts



These eight allergens account for about 90% of all allergic reactions, however allergic reaction to newer allergens such as sesame and kiwi are becoming more common.

## Food labelling:

Since November 2005 European Union (EU) legislation has decreed that all pre-packaged foods sold within the EU must be labelled with the above 8 food allergens as well as the following four less common food allergens: sesame, mustard, celery and sulphites. By 23 December 2007 molluscs and lupin will also have to be included.



## Help and Advice

If you suspect that you have a food allergy or intolerance seek medical advice from your GP and ask to see a Registered Dietitian who will be able to help you with an exclusion diet. If you would like to visit a private dietitian for a consultation please visit [www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk](http://www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk) to search for a registered dietitian in your area.

This Food Fact sheet is a public service of The British Dietetic Association intended for information only.

It is not a substitute for proper medical diagnosis or dietary advice given by a dietitian.

To check that your dietitian is registered check [www.hpc-uk.org](http://www.hpc-uk.org).

Other Food Fact sheets are available from [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)

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