

Food allergy

How to avoid certain foods



What this guide contains

This guide gives information and advice for people with food allergy and people buying food for them. It covers topics including:

- ▶ the difference between food allergy and food intolerance
- ▶ how to spot an allergic reaction
- ▶ buying food
- ▶ eating out

What's the difference between food allergy and food intolerance?

Food allergy and food intolerance are both types of 'food sensitivity'. When someone has a food allergy, their immune system reacts to a particular food as if it isn't safe. This reaction can make them very ill. People can be allergic to one or more foods.

If someone has a severe food allergy, this can cause a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis (pronounced 'anna-fill-axis'). Anaphylaxis affects the whole body, often within minutes of eating the food.

Food intolerance doesn't involve the immune system and is generally not life-threatening. But if you eat a food you are intolerant to, this could make you feel ill or affect your long-term health.

There is also a Food Standards Agency factsheet on food intolerance.

See www.eatwell.gov.uk/allergy

Symptoms of an allergic reaction

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can vary and the reactions can be more or less severe on different occasions. Even if you try very hard to avoid the food that you are allergic to, you may still eat it by accident.

Generally, you won't experience all of the symptoms at the same time and you should bear in mind that some of the symptoms of an allergic reaction can also be symptoms of other illnesses.

The most common symptoms of an allergic reaction include:

- ▶ coughing
- ▶ dry, itchy throat and tongue
- ▶ itchy skin or rash
- ▶ nausea and feeling bloated
- ▶ diarrhoea and/or vomiting
- ▶ wheezing and shortness of breath
- ▶ swelling of the lips and throat
- ▶ runny or blocked nose
- ▶ sore, red and itchy eyes
- ▶ faintness and collapse

It's important that you and your family, friends and colleagues can tell if you are having an allergic reaction, so they can get help or assist you in taking your medication as soon as possible.

What to do if you think you have a food allergy

If you think you have a food allergy, you should get advice from a qualified health professional.

Some allergy and intolerance tests are advertised in magazines, in shops and on the Internet, but for many of these tests there is no evidence that they are reliable. The results of these tests can encourage people to cut lots of foods from their diet for a long time, without professional medical or nutritional advice. This can be bad for someone's health, as well as reducing their choice of what to eat. These tests do not come with any follow-up care or information.

Your GP or a dietitian should be able to advise you. GPs can access a directory of allergy services developed by the British Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology.

The qualified health professional who tests you will normally ask for a full medical history. Once you are diagnosed with a food allergy, the health professional will tell you what food or foods you are allergic to.

They may also give you an idea of how severe your allergy is and how careful you need to be in avoiding particular foods, but remember that you could have a more severe allergic reaction in the future.

Some foods can be quite hard to avoid because they are used as an ingredient in lots of different food products. This guide gives advice on how to avoid the foods that you are allergic to.

Buying food

Pre-packed foods

It is essential to look carefully at the label on any pre-packed food you buy if you have a food allergy yourself, or if you are buying food for someone who does.

Check the ingredients

All pre-packed foods must give a list of ingredients. Always check the ingredients on a food product to see if it contains the food you need to avoid. **Even if you have bought the product before, you should still check the label. The recipe might have changed since the last time you bought it.**

Food labelling rules introduced on 25 November 2005 say that every pre-packed food, including alcoholic drinks, sold in the UK or the rest of the European Union (EU) must show clearly on the label if it contains one of the following foods (or if one of its ingredients contains, or is made from, one of these):

- ▶ peanuts
- ▶ tree nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts
- ▶ eggs
- ▶ milk
- ▶ crustaceans (including prawns, crab and lobster)
- ▶ fish
- ▶ sesame seeds
- ▶ cereals containing gluten (including wheat, rye, barley and oats)
- ▶ soya
- ▶ celery

- mustard
- sulphites and sulphur dioxide (preservatives used in some foods and drinks) at levels above 10mg per kg or per litre

Some people may have allergic reactions to foods that are not on this list, but all ingredients have to be listed on the label of pre-packed food products (apart from a few exceptions). So you can avoid the food you are allergic to by checking the ingredients carefully.

Some food labels may have a warning to show that the food product may contain foods that people are commonly known to be allergic to, for example 'may contain traces of nuts' or 'may contain seeds'. This means that even though nuts or seeds aren't deliberately included in the food, the manufacturer can't be sure that the product doesn't accidentally contain small amounts of them. If you are allergic to any of the foods mentioned in these warnings you should avoid these food products.

If you think that a food product has been labelled wrongly, report this to the trading standards service at your local authority.

Supermarket lists and 'free from' foods

Most of the major supermarket chains produce lists of the products they sell that do not deliberately contain particular foods (such as gluten and milk), and are produced in a way that prevents these ingredients getting into the products accidentally. Contact the supermarket for more information.

These lists can go out of date as products are launched or discontinued, or recipes change. So always check the label on every food product you buy, even if it's on one of these lists.

Many supermarkets and health food shops sell special ranges of products that don't contain foods such as wheat, gluten or dairy products, but these can be expensive. Bear in mind that some foods that are not specifically marketed to people with a food allergy could still be free from the food you are allergic to. **Always check the ingredients.**

Buying food online

Most websites selling food give information about their products that will help you choose those that don't contain the food you need to avoid. But sometimes this information might not be up to date, so always check the label every time you have food delivered.

Foods that are not pre-packed

Foods that aren't pre-packed don't have to be labelled with the same information as pre-packed foods, so you might not be able to check the ingredients. Foods that aren't pre-packed include foods sold from a bakery, butcher, deli counter or salad bar, and foods weighed and sold loose.

It's possible that small amounts of the food you need to avoid could have got into one of these products, for example, from being next to another food, from a knife or spoon, or from being wrapped in paper or a bag that has touched another food. If you have a severe allergy, it's generally safer to avoid these foods.

Eating out

Some people need to be more careful than others to avoid the food they are allergic to. This is because a tiny amount could cause a life-threatening reaction. The following advice about restaurants and foods that aren't pre-packed is aimed at people with more severe food allergies.

If you have a severe allergy, remember that when you eat food prepared by someone else, for example in a restaurant, you can't be absolutely sure that it won't contain the food you are allergic to. But there are things you can do to reduce the chances of having a problem.

Tell the restaurant

- When you book a table at a restaurant, tell the person taking the booking about your food allergy and ask them to either check with the chef or ask to speak to the chef directly to be sure they can provide you with a meal that doesn't contain the food you are allergic to. If they are not sure, it's better to eat somewhere else.
- When you arrive at a restaurant, make sure the waiter or waitress knows about your allergy and how serious it is. If you are not confident that they understand how important it is for you to avoid a particular food, then it's better not to eat there.

Ask about the dishes

- Read the menu carefully to see if there is any mention of the food you are allergic to in the name or description of a dish. Remember that the food might not be mentioned, so always check with the waiter or waitress.
- Tell them what dishes you are planning to order and ask them to check with the chef that they definitely do not contain the food you need to avoid. If you can, speak to the chef. If the staff don't seem sure that the dish is free from that food, it's better to order something else.

- ▶ If you have a nut or seed allergy, ask what oils have been used in salad dressings and if there are any nuts or seeds in the garnishes.

Watch out for 'hidden' ingredients

- ▶ Be aware of foods that contain the food you are allergic to, for example almonds in marzipan, peanuts in satay sauce, oyster sauce in Chinese food, fish sauce in Thai dishes, milk in some crisps or sesame seeds in houmous.
- ▶ If you are allergic to nuts or peanuts, be especially careful when choosing a dessert, because nuts are often used in cakes, trifles, etc, for example as a decoration on top, or in the base, and they might not be included in the name or description of the dessert.

Be prepared

- ▶ If you have a food allergy, always take your medication with you. If at any time during the meal you think that you may be having a reaction, stop eating and take your medication. If you think you are having a severe reaction, ask your friends, family or the restaurant staff to call for an ambulance with a paramedic.

If you have an allergy to nuts, seeds or peanuts, you should be very careful with Malaysian, Thai, Chinese and Indian dishes, because these commonly contain nuts or peanuts, or are cooked in oils made from nuts, seeds or groundnuts (another name for peanuts). Many vegetarian dishes also contain nuts.

Remember that nuts can be ground up, which means you might not be able to see them. For example, ground almonds or peanut flour can be used to thicken sauces in Indian food and the chef may not think of this as nuts or peanuts when you ask about the content of the meal.

If you can't be confident that dishes are free from nuts, seeds and peanuts (and not cooked in nut, groundnut or sesame oil) it's safer to avoid eating meals or takeaways from these types of restaurants.

Remember, meals are not always made the same way, so if you have eaten a particular dish in one restaurant, don't assume it will be OK the next time or in a different restaurant.

Self-service areas

Some restaurants and cafés have self-service areas where food is in open containers. Even though some dishes might not contain the food you are allergic to, it's easy for a small amount to get into a dish accidentally, either because containers are next to each other, or because people use the same spoons for different dishes. If you have a severe food allergy, it's safer to avoid eating food from this kind of self-service area.

Medication

There isn't a cure for food allergy, so the only way to prevent a reaction is to avoid the food you are allergic to.

If you have a severe food allergy, you will probably be prescribed antihistamines and a pen containing adrenaline (sometimes known as epinephrine). This is to inject yourself if you have a reaction.

Never go anywhere without your medication.

If you, or your child, are prescribed an adrenaline pen, your health professional will show you how to use it. If you're not sure what to do, ask them for advice.

People who have a severe food allergy should also wear a bracelet or necklace giving details of their allergy, so medical staff will know about it in an emergency.

Friends and family

Make sure your family, friends and work colleagues know about your food allergy and what to look out for when buying food for you. If you have a severe food allergy, you should also make sure they know what to do if you have a reaction.

If you have a child who has been diagnosed with a food allergy, it's especially important that you and anyone who looks after them (including teachers and the parents of friends who they might visit) know how to avoid the foods they are allergic to and what to do if they have an allergic reaction, including how to use their adrenaline pen.

Schools should have plans to deal with an emergency, but you should discuss your child's needs in detail with their school.

Going on holiday

When you go on holiday abroad, it's a good idea to find out beforehand how you can explain your allergy in the appropriate language. The Allergy Action website has a section on the names of common allergies and useful expressions in various languages, which can be useful when ordering or buying food abroad. See: www.allergyaction.org

Eating a healthy diet

It's important for everyone to eat a healthy balanced diet. Sometimes people with a food allergy worry that not being able to eat a certain food will harm their health. But it's the overall balance of your diet that matters.

So if you can't eat certain foods, there are other foods you can eat to give you the nutrients you need. If you are concerned about your diet, it's a good idea to talk to a dietitian, who will be able to advise you about eating a healthy diet while avoiding the foods you are allergic to.

You can contact a dietitian through your local hospital or GP surgery. To find details of registered dietitians working in private practice in your area, visit the Dietitians Unlimited website (www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk) or send a stamped addressed envelope marked 'private practice' to The British Dietetic Association, 5th Floor, Charles House, 148/9 Great Charles Street, Queensway, Birmingham B3 3HT.

Remember, don't cut food groups out of your diet without medical advice.

You can find out more about healthy eating and food allergies at: www.eatwell.gov.uk

Useful contacts

Allergy Action

tel 01727 855294

email info@allergyaction.org

www.actionallergy.org.uk

Allergy UK

3 White Oak Square

London Road

Swanley

Kent

BR8 7AG

helpline 01322 619898

email info@allergyuk.org

www.allergyfoundation.com

The Anaphylaxis Campaign

PO Box 275

Farnborough

GU14 6SX

tel 01252 542029

email info@anaphylaxis.org.uk

www.anaphylaxis.org.uk

Asthma UK

Providence House

Providence Place

London

N1 0NT

tel 08457 010203

www.asthma.org.uk

The British Dietetic Association

5th Floor Charles House

148/9 Great Charles Street

Queensway

Birmingham

B3 3HT

tel 0121 200 8080

email info@bda.uk.com

www.bda.uk.com

The British Nutrition Foundation

High Holborn House

52-54 High Holborn

London

WC1V 6RQ

tel 020 7404 6504

email postbox@nutrition.org.uk

www.nutrition.org.uk

Foods Matter

5 Lawn Road

London

NW3 2XS

tel 020 7722 2866

email info@foodsmatter.com

www.foodsmatter.com

The Food Standards Agency's consumer advice and information site:

www.eatwell.gov.uk

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