

Food allergies - general information and management guide

What is a food allergy?

Allergies are becoming more and more common in Australia, approximately one in three Australians will develop an allergy at some point in their lives.

Although allergies can be dangerous for some people, they can be easily managed if the right steps are taken.

Being aware of your allergies and taking on the right management strategies is extremely important for living with an allergy.

A food allergy is when someone's immune system reacts to the protein in the food, thinking that it is dangerous like a parasite; this reaction causes you to develop different symptoms, which can range from mild to severe. The most common food allergies in Australia are peanuts, tree nuts (includes most other nuts such as macadamia, hazelnuts, almonds etc), egg, cow's milk, seafood, fish, sesame, soy and wheat.



Food allergies most commonly develop before the age of five, but can develop at any age. Children will commonly outgrow allergies, but allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, sesame and seafood will continue lifelong for approximately ~ 75% of affected children. When a food allergy develops for the first time in adults, it usually continues lifelong.

Not all adverse reactions to foods are allergies.

The word 'allergy' is often incorrectly used to describe other reactions to foods that are annoying but not harmful, including some skin reactions, diarrhoea or constipation. This can include food intolerances, enzyme deficiencies, food poisoning or skin reactions to physical contact with foods. It is important to differentiate between these reactions and true food allergies, as the ways to manage food allergies is different and much stricter than for other adverse food reactions/intolerances. See below for further information regarding proper diagnosis of food allergies.

Food allergy signs and symptoms

For most allergens, it only takes a tiny amount to cause a reaction in an allergic



person. For example, it only takes 1/1000th of a peanut to cause a reaction! Symptoms can develop within 30 minutes of coming into contact with the allergen. Signs and symptoms vary depending on who you are and what the allergen is, but can include:

- Hives
- Swelling around the mouth
- Vomiting
- Stomach pains and/or
- Diarrhoea
- Anaphylaxis (which may include any of the following: difficult/noisy breathing, swelling of the throat/tongue, difficulty talking, wheezing or coughing, dizziness and becoming pale and floppy in young children)

These food reactions range from mild (e.g. swelling/itchy mouth) to severe (anaphylaxis). These symptoms develop because of how your body responds to the protein in the allergen. The body develops 'antibodies' (the soldiers and protectors of your body) to fight the allergen as if it was a bacteria in the body, even though the allergen is actually harmless.

When someone comes into contact with their allergen, your antibodies pick this up and send out different chemicals to try to

destroy the allergen and protect the body (such as 'histamines'). If the body actually had a bacterial infection, these histamines would help to fight it off; but because it is instead just fighting a harmless allergen, it instead causes an increase in blood flow to different parts of your body, which irritates it. This causes hotness, redness, itching and/or swelling. Cramps and spasms to the muscles in the bowels and respiratory tract (which includes lungs) can also happen, causing issues with breathing and diarrhoea.

Possible signs of a food allergy in a breastfed infant include:

- Frequent/severe vomiting
- Severe and unresponsive eczema
- Skin reactions (urticaria, eczema)
- As well as less obvious symptoms such as infantile colic, reflux of stomach contents, eczema, chronic diarrhoea and failure to thrive in infants.

If you suspect a food allergen in your infant, seek professional help from an immunology/allergy specialist to help with diagnosis and management. If your infant develops the above symptoms, it is important to seek medical attention immediately.



Diagnosis of Food Allergies

Diagnosis of food allergies should always be medically confirmed; all foods have nutrients in them and should not be cut out unless an allergy has been diagnosed. Unfortunately, there are a lot of scientifically unproven and unorthodox tests around for 'diagnosing' allergies, some of these include cytotoxic food testing, kinesiology and Vega testing (see link below for details on these unproven tests). These are often expensive tests and lead to incorrect diagnosis and sometimes dangerous avoidance of certain foods. Your doctor will be able to give you information on scientific ways of diagnosing allergies, and refer you to an immunology/allergy specialists if necessary. For further information on diagnosing allergies, visit

www.allergy.org.au/patients/allergy-testing/allergy-testing

9 tips for managing your food allergy

As there is currently no cure for food allergies, strict, 100% avoidance is critical for the management of food allergies. Nine important general steps for living with a food allergy are:

1. **Be aware of the early signs** and symptoms of an allergic reaction and know what to do in an emergency

2. **Carry your Epi-Pen** (if prescribed) and know how to use it. Some people may require an Epi-Pen (a needle of adrenaline) to treat severe reactions to food allergies. Your doctor will be able to tell you if you need this. If you do not feel confident using an Epi-Pen, speak with your doctor about more education

3. **Get an ASCIA Action Plan** for managing your anaphylaxis - The Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA) is the peak professional body of allergy and clinical immunology specialists in Australia and New Zealand.

Their ASCIA Action Plans are specifically designed to help those who suffer from severe allergic reactions including anaphylaxis. See their website (www.allergy.org.au/) for further details.

4. **Know what foods contain your allergen** and what foods are considered high risk for cross-contamination. Check out the different





'NEMO' resources for specific information on food allergens.

5. **Know how to read food labels** and identify if a food contains any traces of your allergen. All food labels should be read carefully before consuming each time, even if it has been used safely in the past as ingredients may change without warning.

Nutrition Information		
Servings per package: 1		
Serving size: 35g		
	Per Serve	Per 100g
Energy	501kJ	1430kJ
Protein	3.5g	10g
Fat	0.4g	1
Saturated	0.2g	0.5g
Carbohydrates		
Total	25.3g	72.2g
Sugar	7.5g	21.5g
Fibre	3.4g	9.7g
Sodium	185mg	535mg

Ingredients: Cereals (44% (wheat flour, oatmeal, maize flour), sugar, wheat gluten, molasses, salt, barley malt extract), minerals (calcium carbonate, iron), mineral salt (sodium bicarbonate), natural colour (paprika, turmeric), vitamins (vitamin C, niacin, thiamin, riboflavin, vitamin B5, folate).
Contains gluten containing cereals.
May contain traces of peanuts and/or tree nuts.

6. It's best **not to keep the allergic food in your house** to avoid accidental eating it. If this isn't possible though, it's important to reduce the risk of cross contamination at home. The NEMO resource on cross contamination can help to guide you.
7. When dining out or at a friend's house - **be assertive and ask questions** about ingredients, food preparation and storage. Always inform restaurant managers about your allergies.
8. **Become a member of Allergy and Anaphylaxis Australia.** Membership provides you with support for living with allergies, access to support groups, seminars, newsletters, and discounts on resources.

9. **Most importantly – When in doubt, leave it out!** If you do not feel confident about managing your allergy, talk to your immunology/allergy specialist to get further help.

Where can I go for further information?

1. **ASCIA:** is the peak professional body of allergy and clinical immunology specialists in Australia, providing resources to help with living with an allergy. Website: www.allergy.org.au/
2. **Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia:** is an organisation that aims to improve awareness of allergies through education and research. They help individuals, families, schools, workplaces, the government and food industries to manage allergies. Visit www.allergyfacts.org.au for further information and to become a member.
3. **FSANZ** (Food Standards Australia and New Zealand): is the government agency who develop codes and standards for foods, including labelling, food safety and additives. Website: www.foodstandards.gov.au

For further information contact your Dietitian or Nutritionist : _____