

What is a Food Allergy?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy occurs when the immune system overreacts to a particular food. The next time a person eats this food, the immune system releases large amounts of chemicals, including histamine, to protect the body. The chemicals trigger many allergic symptoms that can affect the respiratory and cardiovascular systems, gastrointestinal tract, and the skin.

How is a food allergy diagnosed?

Diagnosis requires a carefully organized and detailed assessment problem. Your healthcare provider may ask you to keep a food diary for 1 to 2 weeks of everything you eat, what symptoms you have, and how long after eating they occur.

What are the symptoms of an allergic reaction to foods?

Body System	Allergic Reaction
Skin: most common allergic reaction	hives dermatitis eczema
Respiratory	coughing wheezing difficulty breathing
Oral	tingling sensation of mouth tongue or throat swelling
Gastrointestinal	vomiting diarrhea abdominal cramping or pain stomach bloating gas

Symptoms may occur immediately or within a few hours after eating a food to which you are allergic.

What is a severe allergic reaction?

A severe allergic reaction to eating a particular food is called **anaphylaxis** (ana·phy·lax·is). Anaphylaxis is a generalized allergic reaction that can be severe and sometimes fatal. The first signs of anaphylaxis may be an overall

feeling warm and/or flushed itchy, red skin. More severe symptoms can be anxiety difficulty breathing, lightheadness, and loss of consciousness.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis or possible anaphylaxis are an emergency and requires immediate treatment.

CALL 911.

This is a MEDICAL EMERGENCY.

What is the treatment for a severe reaction?

Anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction is treated with injectable epinephrine, antihistamines, and other emergency measures.

CALL 911.

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What can I do to reduce or avoid an allergic food reaction?

The best treatment for food allergy is strict avoidance of the allergy-causing food to avoid a reaction. Other suggestions include:

- Wear an identification bracelet that describes the food allergy.
- Read food labels carefully and completely to avoid allergy-causing ingredients.
- Always ask about food ingredients and food preparation especially when eating away from home or at restaurants. Ask to speak to the cook or chef about your allergy.
- Tell people who are preparing your food or eating with you about your food allergy.
- **Be prepared for emergencies:** People with potentially life-threatening allergic reactions must strictly avoid those foods that may cause a severe reaction. This person may need to carry injectable epinephrine to treat a severe reaction. If you have an anaphylactic reaction after eating a food, seek emergency treatment by calling 911.

DO NOT ATTEMPT TO DRIVE TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.

CALL 911.

This is a MEDICAL EMERGENCY.

References:

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology (AAAAI) @ www.aaaai.org
Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network. 1-800-929-4040. www.foodallergy.org

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education