

Allergy basics and stats

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is a rapid and potentially serious response to a food by your immune system. It can trigger classic allergy symptoms such as a rash, wheezing and itching.

The most common food allergies among adults are fish, shellfish and nuts, including peanuts, walnuts, hazelnuts and Brazil nuts. Children often have allergies to [milk](#) and [eggs](#) as well as to peanuts, other nuts and fish.

What is an intolerance?

Food intolerances are more common than food allergies. The symptoms of food intolerance tend to appear more slowly, often many hours after eating the problem food. Typical symptoms include bloating and stomach cramps.

It's possible to be intolerant to several different foods, which can make it difficult to identify which foods are causing the problem.

Food intolerances can also be difficult to tell apart from other digestive disorders that produce similar symptoms, such as inflammatory bowel disease, gastrointestinal obstructions or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

What can trigger an allergic reaction to food?

An allergic reaction can be produced by a tiny amount of a food ingredient that a person is sensitive to, for example a teaspoon of milk powder, a fragment of peanut or just one or two sesame seeds.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction can range from mild symptoms, such as itching around the mouth and rashes, and can progress to more severe symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhoea, wheezing and, on occasion, anaphylaxis (shock). **Around ten people in the UK die from allergic reactions to food every year due to undeclared allergenic ingredients.**

Is there a cure for food allergies?

There is no cure for food allergies. The only way to manage the condition is to avoid the foods that make you ill. This can be achieved by checking ingredients, details on labels of prepacked foods and being provided allergen information for non-prepacked foods. It is

very important that food businesses provide clear and accurate information about allergenic ingredients in their products.

How many people in the UK suffer from a food allergy?

In the UK, it is estimated that 1-2% of adults and 5-8% of children have a food allergy. This equates to around 2 million people living in the UK with a food allergy and this figure does not include those with food intolerances. This means the actual number of affected people living with a food allergy and/or food intolerance is considerably more.

- An estimated 21 million adults in the UK suffer from at least one allergy (includes allergy to pollen, animals and medicines), and around 10 million adults suffer from more than one (Mintel, 2010). Out of those numbers, around 1 - 2% of adults have a food allergy.
- 5 – 8 % of children have a proven food allergy (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2011) with up to 1 in 55 children having a peanut allergy.
- An estimated 1 in 100 people have coeliac disease (an autoimmune response to gluten proteins found in a number of cereals).
- UK hospital admissions for children with food allergies have increased by 700% since 1990 (Gupta, 2007).

Myth buster

1. You can be allergic to any foodstuff

TRUE: This is true in theory, but in fact just a handful of foods cause 90% of allergic reactions to food in the UK and Europe.

2. Food allergies can be fatal

TRUE: People with allergies can have a reaction called anaphylaxis (pronounced ana-fill-axis), which can be fatal if it isn't treated immediately, usually with an injection of adrenaline (epinephrine).

3. A food allergy or intolerance can be easily self-diagnosed

FALSE: It is thought that a much higher number of people will believe that their symptoms are being caused by a food allergy or intolerance than is actually the case. Around 30% believe they are allergic or intolerant to one or more foods, but a Food Standards Agency (FSA) report in 2008 estimated that only 5-8% of children and 1-2% of adults have a food allergy.

- 4. Most children grow out of their allergy to eggs, milk, wheat and soya**
TRUE: It is true that most children do, generally by about the age of five, due to the gut maturing or a change in the immune system's response to that food.
- 5. Most people will grow out of allergies to peanuts, seafood, fish and tree nuts**
FALSE: An allergy to peanuts, seafood, fish and tree nuts is very rarely resolved.
- 6. Food allergies or intolerances can be cured**
FALSE: There is currently no cure for food allergies or intolerances. The only way to prevent a reaction is to avoid the food you are sensitive to.
- 7. Allergies and intolerances run in families**
TRUE: If you have parents or a sibling with an allergic condition, such as eczema, asthma or a food allergy, you are at a higher risk of developing a food allergy or intolerance.

Source: NHS Choices

Please see our infographic – Your quick guide to food allergies and intolerances at www.food.gov.uk/allergen-resources