



Food Allergy

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy occurs when your immune system mistakenly identifies a certain food protein as harmful and triggers an allergic reaction. Your immune system attempts to 'protect' you against this invader by producing an anti-allergy antibody called Immunoglobulin (IgE). These IgE antibodies trigger the release of histamines and powerful chemicals into the bloodstream, producing an allergic reaction.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of an allergic attack include hives, redness or swelling of the lips, eyes or face, an itchy throat or mouth, stomach pain, vomiting, choking or wheezing, and a runny nose or watery eyes. Symptoms often occur immediately after eating the offending food, but can be delayed by several hours.

The most severe form of allergic reaction is anaphylaxis, a multi-system allergic reaction that impacts the respiratory tract and blood circulation, and can cause a potentially fatal drop in blood pressure. If you have some or all of the above symptoms, such as hives, cramps or vomiting, and feel sleepy or dizzy as well, you may be suffering from anaphylaxis. This is a real medical emergency, and may be fatal. People with asthma, or an allergy to peanuts, tree nuts or seafood, are at the greatest risk for anaphylaxis.

How is a food allergy different to food intolerance?

Some people are intolerant to certain chemical components that occur naturally in food, or lack the enzymes to digest certain foods, like dairy. People with these kinds of food intolerances may suffer discomfort, diarrhea, rashes or other symptoms, but the intolerance does not involve the immune system, and does not produce antibodies that trigger allergic reactions.



How are food allergies diagnosed?

There are three scientifically proven, medically sound allergy tests: the skin prick test, an IgE blood test, and an oral food challenge.

The skin prick test is a quick, efficient and accurate way to test for a food allergy. A doctor will introduce a tiny amount of the allergen to the skin on your arm (or on the back of a small child) and prick the skin through the drop. If there is a positive reaction, the skin will develop a small red, weal that the doctor will measure to determine the severity of the allergy. The test does not hurt, although the weal may become itchy. It's possible to test for up to 25 allergies in one sitting.

Another way to test for allergies is the IgE blood test. Your doctors will take a blood sample and send it to a lab, where it is analyzed for the presence of the allergen-specific IgE antibody. Your doctor may also conduct an oral food challenge, and ask you to consume some of the suspected allergen in a clinical setting, where you can be observed and treated if any adverse reaction takes place. This should never be done at home.

Allergy sufferers should be wary of other tests that are purported to screen for food allergies. There are many other 'tests' offered by non-medical practitioners that have no scientific basis whatsoever. If you think you may have a food allergy, visit a qualified doctor or allergist.

How are food allergies treated?

The best way to avoid a reaction is to avoid the food you're allergic to. Read labels carefully, and find out alternative names to the food or protein that triggers your reaction. You should carry an antihistamine with you at all times, and take the prescribed dose in the event of an allergic reaction. If the symptoms are moderate to severe, you may need to inject yourself with an epinephrine auto injector (Epipen) and call for medical help. An allergist will tell you if you need to carry an Epipen. In Singapore, the emergency call number is 995. You should then proceed immediately to a hospital.

Your doctor or allergy specialist will help create an emergency action plan, which spells out which allergies you have and which medicine needs to be administered in the event of a reaction. You should keep a copy of this plan with any medications you need, and carry it with you at all times. You should also share this plan with family, caregivers, colleagues or teachers who may be able to assist if a reaction takes place.



How can I help my child cope with their food allergy?

Having a food allergy can affect the self-esteem, anxiety levels and social development of a child. For example, a child may feel different if their food looks different from the food the other kids are eating, or feel upset if they can't eat what other children have. If they've had a severe allergic reaction, they may develop anxieties about food and mealtimes. Effective management of the allergy and a good attitude can help decrease your child's anxiety.

If your child goes to school, it's a good idea to send their lunch so you can ensure they have 'safe' food to eat. Talk to the teachers about instituting a 'no-food-sharing' rule. If your child has a nut allergy, ask if the teacher can institute a no-nut rule for the entire class. Explain that touching the oils produced by nuts can set off a reaction; an allergic child who touches a chair or pen that has been handled by someone who's had a peanut butter sandwich, for example, could have an allergic reaction. For birthday parties and other celebrations, provide some treats that the teacher can give your child at the same time so they have a celebration snack while the others are eating the birthday cake. Make sure your child's teacher knows where his or her emergency kit is, and understands how to administer the medication.

It may be helpful to join a support group or playgroup, to share and learn from other families who are in a similar situation. There are several such groups in Singapore, some linked to specific schools and others that cater to a broader group of parents outside the school system.

About Us

The Asthma and Allergy Association is a community-based organization that aims to increase awareness of allergic diseases in Singapore, and facilitate patient education and empowerment.

We hold a series of public talks and family-oriented events throughout the year, such as the World Asthma Day and our Food Allergy Awareness Day family carnival & seminar, as well as other public education programs. The AAA also administers several funds to help low-income families buy asthma and eczema medications.

To join the AAA, visit our website at www.aaa.org.sg and download a membership form. Membership costs just \$20 a year. Members receive invitations to family activities and free seminars and talks by leading allergy specialists. We can also help you connect with support groups in Singapore.