



## FRIGHTENED OF FOOD

### *Living with Food Allergies*

Imagine what life would be like if you had to constantly check out the ingredients in your favorite foods to make sure your life wasn't in danger after eating even a tiny bit. For some people with severe food allergies, that's become their way of life.

Food allergies occur if your immune system has an abnormal reaction to food. Normally, your immune system protects you from germs and disease by fighting off the harmful organisms that can make you sick. When your immune system makes a mistake and attacks a harmless substance you eat, it can cause serious, even life-threatening, allergic symptoms.

Symptoms of a food allergy can include coughing; tingling in the mouth; skin reactions like hives and itching; and nausea, vomiting, stomach pain or diarrhea. Food allergies can also cause a sudden and severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis brings life-threatening symptoms, which can include difficulty breathing, a drop in blood pressure and narrowing of the airways and wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe).

Foods that can cause allergies include fish and shellfish such as shrimp, crayfish, lobster and crab; eggs, milk, peanuts, and tree nuts such as walnuts. Peanut and tree nut allergies are the leading causes of anaphylaxis.

Research shows that you're more likely to develop food allergies if several members of your family have allergies. That includes any type of allergy, including hay fever. If you have 2 allergic parents, you're more likely to develop a food allergy than someone with 1 allergic parent, according to Dr. Dean D. Metcalfe, chief of NIH's Laboratory of Allergic Diseases in the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

*"There are many different genes or genetic traits that combine to cause different levels of allergies in some people," Metcalfe says.*

People with asthma are particularly at risk for anaphylactic reactions. "If a child has asthma," Metcalfe says, "it's very important for parents to know that their child is at greater

risk, because most deaths in children from anaphylaxis to a food occur in children who have asthma.”

Some children are actually born allergic to certain foods, whereas others develop food allergies over time. Children are more likely than adults to outgrow allergies to milk, eggs or soy as their digestive tracts mature and their immune systems develop. They don't, however, outgrow allergies to peanuts. But scientists are testing whether individuals might be gradually desensitized to peanuts so that eventually they would not suffer an allergic reaction to them.

If you have an allergic reaction to a certain food, you may also be allergic to similar foods. This is called cross-reactivity. For example, if you're allergic to shrimp, allergy testing may show that you're also allergic to other seafood.

If you have a food allergy, it's best to prepare for an emergency in case you eat the wrong food by accident.

“When you have an allergic reaction to food,” Rotrosen says, “you may have a good idea of how severe the reaction is, but not always, as it is very difficult to predict.”

Since allergic reactions to food can be hazardous, Rotrosen recommends that people be very cautious. Call 911 if you or someone you know seems to be having an allergic reaction to food.

“Physicians usually prescribe an auto-injector device that has epinephrine (adrenaline) for allergy sufferers,” Rotrosen says. “Unfortunately, too few of these are prescribed, some people do not always carry it with them and some also fail to renew their prescriptions.” Ask your doctor if you need to carry one and learn how to give that shot to yourself if needed.

One established treatment for some allergies is called immunotherapy. It involves giving shots under the skin with tiny quantities of extract from the thing you're allergic to. Giving these injections over a long period can build up your tolerance. For food allergies, however, this procedure can be dangerous.

## DANGEROUS FOOD ALLERGY SYMPTOMS

A sudden and severe allergic reaction is called anaphylaxis. Watch out for these life-threatening symptoms and call for help if you see or feel them:

- Difficulty breathing
- Drop in blood pressure
- Rapid heartbeat
- Swollen tongue, throat and other parts of the body
- Narrowing of the airways and wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Fainting

