

3-2010

Food Allergies

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Recommended Citation

Craig, Winston J., "Food Allergies" (2010). *Lake Union Herald*. 391.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/391>

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A misdiagnosis can create unnecessary hardships.



Children can outgrow food allergies.

Food Allergies

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

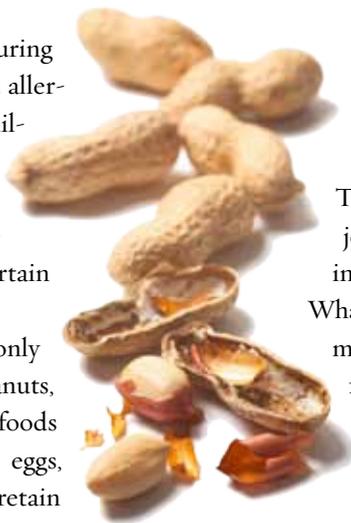
Runny nose, itchy red rash, watery eyes, coughing and sneezing, diarrhea, wheezing, abdominal cramps and hives—these or other symptoms are commonly experienced by those with allergies to such things as mold, dander, dust, pollen or certain foods. Food allergies in children are more common when the parents have allergies such as hay fever or asthma.

The number of food allergies has risen during the past decade by about 20 percent. Food allergies affect about six to eight percent of children under the age of four, while three to four percent of adults have food allergies. Allergic reactions to food are most commonly caused by accidental exposure to certain foods.

For adults, the foods that most commonly cause allergic reactions include shellfish, peanuts, tree nuts, fish and eggs. In children, the foods that most commonly cause problems are eggs, milk, peanuts and tree nuts. Adults usually retain their allergies for life, while children sometimes outgrow them. Children are more likely to outgrow allergies to milk, egg or soy than allergies to peanuts.

Allergic reactions to food can sometimes cause serious illness and death. Tree nuts and peanuts are the leading causes of deadly allergic reactions called anaphylaxis, which account for more than 100 deaths a year in the U.S. Only about one in 200 persons are allergic to peanuts and tree nuts.

It is reported that one out of every three people either believe they have a food allergy or modify their diet or their family's diet because of a suspected allergy. Thus, while food allergy is commonly suspected, healthcare providers diagnose it much less frequently. A true food allergy is an abnormal response to a food triggered by the body's immune system, in which the antibody IgE is produced.



A misdiagnosis in children can result in needlessly restricting their diet of certain foods which may provide essential vitamins and minerals not easily obtained elsewhere. The misdiagnosis may also unnecessarily subject a person to ridicule or to social burdens involving behavior change and isolation.

What some consider as food allergy symptoms may actually be symptoms associated with a food intolerance. Food intolerances are more common than food allergies. Examples of food intolerances include food poisoning from contaminated food; lactose intolerance from consuming certain dairy products;

reactions to foods containing high levels of histamine such as cheese, wines and certain kinds of fish; flushing, headache or chest discomfort from consuming large amounts of the flavor enhancer MSG; and severe bronchospasm resulting when asthmatics consume large amounts of foods containing sulfites (used to prevent mold growth).

The memory of an unpleasant event in childhood that was tied to eating a particular food can also trigger an unpleasant reaction to the food consumed later in life. An ulcer can also cause symptoms (such as abdominal pain) similar to those seen with a food allergy. Clearly, it is better to have a food allergy diagnosed by a healthcare practitioner than by self diagnosis.

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