Your quick guide to food allergies and intolerances

A food allergy is caused when your immune system mistakenly thinks that certain foods are a threat to your body. A food intolerance doesn’t usually involve your immune system, however, coeliac disease is an intolerance to gluten and does involve the immune system.

Allergy facts

Between 1-2% of adults* and 5-8% of children in the UK have a food allergy**

What is a…

Food allergy

Food allergic reactions range from mild to very serious. Symptoms can affect different areas of the body at the same time and can include rashes, swelling, chest tightness and shortness of breath. Serious cases can lead to anaphylaxis (a life-threatening reaction) and death.

Food intolerance

Food intolerance can be caused by difficulties digesting certain ingredients, such as lactose from milk. Symptoms include diarrhea, bloating and stomach cramps and usually only occur several hours after eating the food.

Coeliac disease

Coeliac disease is caused by a reaction of the immune system to gluten. Symptoms include bloating, diarrhea, tiredness, mouth ulcers, anaemia, osteoporosis and usually occur several hours after eating the food.

All types of food can cause a reaction. However, certain proteins are responsible for most food allergies and intolerances. The most common food allergies in children are caused by:

- Milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts
- Fish

Odds that a child with two allergic parents will develop allergies: 70%

Odds that a child with one allergic parent will develop allergies: 33%

There is no cure for food allergies, food intolerance or coeliac disease. The only way to prevent a reaction is to avoid the foods that make you ill.

Hospital admissions due to food allergies in the UK increased by 500% between 1990 and 2007***

Treatment

For more information, visit food.gov.uk/allergy or nhs.uk/conditions/allergies

You can sign up to our allergy alerts on food.gov.uk/email, or follow #AllergyAlert on Twitter and Facebook

Let’s keep connected at food.gov.uk/facebook

Join our conversation at food.gov.uk/twitter

Watch us on food.gov.uk/youtube