

Food Allergies and Intolerances

25 August 2005

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is an abnormal immune reaction to a food that is harmless for most people. Antibodies against the food are produced so that when the allergic individual eats the food, histamine and other defensive chemicals are released causing inflammation. These chemicals trigger allergic symptoms that can affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin or cardiovascular system.

Which foods can cause allergies?

Foods that are most commonly associated with allergies (**please note this is not a complete list of foods that can cause allergies**):

- Peanuts and peanut products,
- Tree nuts and tree nut products,
- Egg and egg products,
- Milk and milk products,
- Fish and fish products,
- Crustacea and their products,
- Sesame seeds, soybeans and their products.

Recently, lupin bean flour has been reported as a cause of severe allergic reactions. (Lupin is a legume that contains proteins similar to those present in peanuts.)

Royal jelly, bee pollen and propolis can also cause allergies in susceptible people.

Some people with latex (natural rubber) allergy have associated allergies to certain fruits and vegetables.

Anaphylaxis and food allergies

Anaphylaxis is a severe and rapidly progressing allergic reaction which is potentially life threatening. Anaphylactic attacks are commonly triggered by the above food products and are characterised by symptoms such as rapidly spreading hives, swelling of the face, tongue and throat, difficulty breathing, wheezing, vomiting and loss of consciousness. Death can occur from severe asthma or allergic "shock".

Immediate treatment with injected adrenaline can be lifesaving. People at risk of anaphylaxis are generally advised to carry an adrenaline auto-injector (EpiPen®) for emergency use.

Peanut is the most likely of all the food allergens listed above to cause life threatening anaphylaxis. In highly sensitive individuals severe allergic reactions

can be triggered by eating tiny amounts of peanut, or by inhaling airborne food particles containing peanut.

The **NSW Health** website has further information specifically on peanut allergies in a range of languages:

http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/public-health/alerts/peanut_allergy/peanut_allergy_languages.html

The **Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy** (ASCI) provides a wealth of information on food allergies, the foods that cause them, symptoms and much more:

<http://www.allergy.org.au/aer/infobulletins/index.htm>

Anaphylaxis Australia Inc is a consumer support group providing information on allergies and anaphylaxis:

<http://www.allergyfacts.org.au>.

A useful US website can be found at:

<http://www.foodallergy.org>

Food Allergy vs. Intolerance

Food intolerances are an adverse reaction to a food or food substance that does not involve the immune system - as a result it is quite different from a food allergy. Food intolerance reactions can be triggered by a range of natural substances or additives present in many different foods. Susceptibility is very individual. Common symptoms include hives, stomach and bowel upsets, headaches and feeling generally unwell. Symptoms are rarely serious, but sulphite preservatives can sometimes cause severe reactions in people with asthma. Further information can be obtained from:

http://www.allergy.org.au/aer/infobulletins/food_intolerance.htm

or:

http://www.allergy.org.au/aer/infobulletins/adverse_reactions.htm

Coeliac Disease

Coeliac disease is a disorder of the small bowel caused by an immune reaction to dietary gluten (a protein found in wheat, barley and rye). In this condition, the lining of the bowel is damaged by white blood cells of the immune system rather than by antibodies, and the symptoms are quite different from those caused by a food allergy. Untreated coeliac disease can be associated with long-term health problems, but it does not cause life threatening anaphylaxis. For more information please see the **Coeliac Society of Australia's** website: <http://www.coeliac.org.au>

Allergen and Additive Labelling

Food Standards Australia New Zealand sets standards for labelling of products containing food allergens, gluten and sulphite preservatives. Any product containing these must be declared on the packaging, on or in connection with the display or declared upon request at the time of purchase. Look for statements on product labels, or near the product, like "contains peanuts" or "this product may contain traces of egg or egg products". If you are unsure and these statements aren't on or near the product, ask.

For more information on allergen labelling requirements refer to the **FSANZ** website:

http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/fsc_1_2_3_Warning_Statements_v78.doc

NSW Food Authority

The NSW Food Authority makes sure food labels comply with national standards so consumers are provided with accurate information about the food they buy.

If you suspect a food label does not adhere to the FSANZ guidelines set out above, contact the Food Authority on 1300 552 406.

Education and Training

The **NSW Department of Education and Training** has developed guidelines for schools to assist in the management of children with allergies. The guidelines include forms for doctors/parents, action plans and Epi-Pen instructions.

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentssupport/studenthealth/conditions/anaphylaxis/index.php>

The **ASCIA** web page already discussed is also a useful tool for teachers.

The **Royal Prince Alfred Hospital** offers training for teachers, parents and carers of children with allergies. For information on the course and other allergy related areas go to the hospital's website:

<http://www.cs.nsw.gov.au/rpa/allergy>

Information for the Food Industry

The **Australian Food and Grocery Council** has a great deal of information for businesses that package, or serve food/food products that contain or may contain allergenic products. Visit their site at:

<http://www.afgc.org.au/cmsdocuments/allergen-management.pdf>

The **Food Safety Centre Allergen Bureau** is another worthwhile site to visit:

<http://www.allergenbureau.net>

Further General Information

General information on food allergies can be found at the **Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Alliance** website: <http://www.foodallergyalliance.org/>