



Food Allergies, Intolerances and Sensitivities

We all know people who can eat any kind of food in any combination at any time of the day or night without any adverse reactions. Most of us are not quite so lucky however. Most of us have or have had some kind of food sensitivity, food intolerance, or even severe allergy at some point during our lives. Thankfully, even the worst allergies can be managed by avoidance however in many cases knowing where these foods are hiding out can be tricky as we will soon see.

Where a reaction is severe, we are usually talking about a food allergy because in this case our immune system is reacting to a certain food like it is an invader. As soon as our immune system recognizes this “enemy” histamine and other chemicals are called into action causing hives, asthma, or other symptoms.

The worst kind of reaction is anaphylaxis which, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI), is a life threatening allergic reaction that affects several different parts of the body. Anaphylaxis can affect the skin with reactions such as flushing, itching, or hives. It can affect the airway with swelling of the throat or cause difficulty talking or breathing. It can affect the intestines with nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. It can also affect the ability of the heart to pump blood, causing a drop in blood pressure, unconsciousness and even death.

Eight particular foods account for 90% of all food-related reactions including milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts (walnut, cashew, etc.), fish, shellfish, soy, and wheat. There are no medications that cure food allergies therefore the solution is obvious – steer clear of the food in all manner, shapes and forms.

A food intolerance on the other hand is an adverse reaction to a type of food that does not involve the immune system. For example, an individual who is lactose intolerant is not allergic to milk. Instead, this person’s body does not make the enzyme needed to break down the sugar in milk (lactase) therefore when these foods are consumed, symptoms such as gas, bloating, and abdominal pain may occur. Avoidance may still be the best solution however, adding a supplement containing the enzyme may provide the ability to consume milk products without the side effects.

For the rest of us most food reactions are very subtle. In many cases the reactions are seemingly unrelated to general complaints such as headache, chronic sinus congestion, bouts with diarrhea or alternating diarrhea and constipation, itchy skin, an occasional rash or other things. Determining which foods are triggers for these symptoms can be accomplished by eliminating them from our diet for a period of time then reintroducing them and noticing how we feel.

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When we have a reaction to a food we don't expect to react to, it is probably because of a masked ingredient. It is therefore wise to become attuned to the disguises some of these trigger foods can wear. Let's go through some.

If allergic or sensitive to eggs everything containing eggs must be avoided. This means that besides carefully checking the labels on all commercially prepared foods to see if they contain eggs, egg whites, dried eggs, or albumin, we have to be aware that some vaccines made with egg residues must be avoided as well including injections for flu and yellow fever.

If allergic or sensitive to milk we must check labels carefully for milk, whey, dried milk solids, casein, lactalbumin, sodium caseinate, potassium caseinate, calcium caseinate, butter, cheese, margarine and curds. Less obvious foods to avoid include sherbet made with milk or frozen yogurt, cream sauces and soups, white sauces, baked goods made with milk, mashed potatoes, instant cocoa, breakfast mixes and cereals containing dried milk.

If allergic or sensitive to wheat, it is amazing how many foods there are to avoid including wheat flour, modified food starch, graham flour, farina, spelt and semolina. Common everyday products contain wheat including bread, crackers and other baked goods, cereals and pastas, pancakes and waffles, sauces, gravies and salad dressings, beer, fried foods, and other foods containing bread crumbs including meatloaf, sausage, hot dogs and some cold cuts.

If soy is the culprit, we have to be cognizant that it is used as an ingredient in many high protein foods today and may be in disguise as ingredients such as textured vegetable protein (TPV), hydrolyzed plant protein, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, natural and artificial flavoring, vegetable gum, or vegetable starch. Common foods containing soy include miso, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, tofu, tamari, tempeh vegetable broth, some cereals, and some infant formula.

Peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish are pretty self explanatory however, especially in the case of peanuts and tree nuts, it is wise to avoid any product that could be suspect.

So we see that reactions to food take different forms in varying degrees of severity and that reactions can be minimized by learning which foods are trigger foods, reading labels and asking questions, especially in restaurants. Some restaurants advise customers of unsuspecting ingredients while others do not. It is therefore always a good idea to ask and in severe cases, insist on an accurate answer. Further we may want to question the involvement of a trigger food in a chronic health problem. If elimination of a particular food will make us feel better, it is certainly worth the effort to make the determination.

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