

Food allergies and intolerance

Food allergies and food intolerances are different but they are often confused. About 2 of a 100 people have a food allergy but many more have food intolerances.

Food allergy or intolerance?

Food intolerance is an adverse reaction to a particular food or ingredient, which occurs every time the food is eaten. It's often confused with a food allergy, but it's very different because the immune system isn't activated. A food allergy is an allergic reaction to the food.

An allergy produces specific symptoms, such as swelling of the lips, which usually develops within minutes of eating the food, while intolerance produces more general symptoms, such as indigestion and bloating, which can develop several hours after eating.

Only a tiny particle of food is needed to trigger a food allergy, whereas you would usually need to eat a larger amount of food to trigger intolerance.

The symptoms of a food allergy can be life threatening, whereas the symptoms of a food intolerance are unpleasant but are never immediately life threatening

Food intolerance occur when the body is unable to deal with a certain foodstuff, usually because it doesn't produce enough of the chemical or enzyme needed to properly digest that particular food.

One of the most common intolerances is to cow's milk, which contains a certain type of sugar called lactose. If you have a shortage of the enzyme lactase, you can't break down milk sugar into simpler forms that can be absorbed into the bloodstream. When intolerant to lactose the sufferer may experience symptoms such as bloating, abdominal pain and diarrhoea when they eat or drink dairy products,

Food allergies

Since 1990, there has been a 500 per cent increase in hospital admissions for food allergies among the young. The most frequent food allergies in children are to milk, eggs, soya, wheat, fish, nuts, citrus fruit and tomatoes. Food allergies are more common in children than adults. According to a study done by the Food Safety Agency in the UK in 2008, it was estimated that 5 to 8% of children and 1 to 2% of adults suffered from a food allergy.

In general terms, there are two types of food allergy; an immediate type of allergy and a delayed type of allergy. With immediate type allergies, you notice a reaction very quickly after you eat the offending food, usually within a few minutes. Symptoms include hives, itchiness and swelling and in extreme cases, a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis is an extremely rare but potentially life threatening allergic reaction which if left untreated may lead to death. Symptoms vary but can include anxiety, shortness of breathe, palpitations, swelling of lips, tongue or throat and loss of consciousness. An adrenaline injection is normally the treatment of choice. The adrenaline device used in children is called an Anapen[®] Junior device and must be prescribed by the child's GP. It will only be prescribed in cases of children known to suffer from anaphylactic attacks. It should be carried everywhere by the child. The child's parent must be trained to recognise the symptoms of anaphylaxis and shown how to use the Anapen[®] Junior device. The GP, practice nurse or pharmacist can demonstrate how to use the device.

Delayed-type allergies are more subtle and more difficult to detect. This is because it is the chronic build-up of a particular food that causes the allergic reaction. In young children, the most common delayed type of food allergy is to milk protein, which causes chronic symptoms such as eczema, reflux, colic and diarrhoea. This should not to be confused with lactose intolerance, which does not involve the immune system. Delayed-type allergies are difficult for doctors to diagnose because there's no obvious relationship between eating the food and the onset of symptoms. Because of the fact that these symptoms are also common in children without allergies makes a diagnosis even more difficult.

Most children outgrow food allergies such as milk, eggs, soya and wheat by the time that they start school. Peanut allergies are usually more persistent in children. An estimated 80% of children with peanut allergies remain allergic to peanuts for the rest of their life.

There is currently no cure for food allergies. Treatment involves identifying the specific food that triggers the allergic reaction and then avoiding it. If the child inadvertently eats the food that causes the allergy, an antihistamine such as Zirtek[®] liquid can be given to the child to reduce symptoms such as an itch and hives. Zirtek[®] liquid is available in pharmacies without prescription and is non drowsy so won't affect school work.

Food intolerance

Food intolerance is more common than food allergies. It can occur in adults and children. It occurs when the body is unable to deal with a certain food. This is generally because the affected person lacks enough of the particular chemical or enzyme that is needed for digestion of that food.

One of the most common types is intolerance of cow's milk, which contains a type of sugar called lactose. Many people have a shortage of the enzyme lactase, which is normally made by cells lining the small intestine. Without this enzyme, the lactose intolerant person can not break down milk sugar into simpler forms that can be absorbed into the bloodstream. Symptoms of lactose intolerance include indigestion, bloating, flatulence, diarrhoea and nausea. Babies are usually born with higher levels of lactase, so lactose intolerance usually only begins after the age of about two, as the body begins to produce less of the enzyme. But many people don't experience symptoms until they're much older. A temporary lactase deficiency may follow gastroenteritis, especially in children. Lactose intolerance in children and adults is sometimes misdiagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) as many of the symptoms are similar.

Lactose intolerance is less common among people of northern and western European origin than people of Mediterranean, African, Native American and Asian origin. The reason lactose intolerance is less common in northern and western Europe is evolutionary as dairy consumption has long been a part of the diet in these areas so lactase production has developed as part of evolution over time in people from these areas. About 10 to 15% of the population in northern/western Europe suffer from lactose intolerance. In non-dairy consuming societies such as Thailand, lactose intolerance can be as high as 98% of the population as dairy is not a major part of diet so lactase is not required.

Colic is the name given to the sharp, intermittent abdominal pains suffered by 20-25% of babies. The exact cause of colic is not fully understood, but a recent study in Guy's Hospital in London found that over half of babies suffering from colic had lactose intolerance. When the enzyme lactase was added to the milk of the babies in the study, the symptoms either disappeared or were significantly reduced. Lactase Enzyme drops are available in Whelehan's Pharmacy. Ask our pharmacist for advice and information and treatment options if you feel your baby or child may be lactose intolerant.

Some people have adverse reactions to chemical preservatives and additives in food and drinks, such as sulphites, benzoates, salicylates, monosodium glutamate, caffeine, aspartame and tartrazine. These can be hard to diagnose by eliminating foods so a food intolerance test with a health professional may help.

The lack of a specific enzyme in the body may lead to the build up of toxic by-products and histamine, which then mimic the symptoms of an allergy. The symptoms of food intolerance can be similar to an allergic reaction. This is why many tests for food intolerance, including the one performed by Whelehan's Pharmacy, check for IgG antibodies which if present can detect certain food intolerance.

Symptoms of food intolerance

Food intolerance is not immediately life-threatening, but can still leave the sufferer feeling extremely unwell. Studies show that many people notice a pattern and intuitively suspect foods. However, the symptoms may not follow immediately, sometimes only being fully felt in the following days (for example, joint pains). Frequently too, not one but a number of foods combine to cause reactions, making it hard to clearly identify the problem foods.

As food intolerance is associated with antibody-antigen reactions and consequent inflammation, the range of possible symptoms is broad. And the problem is aggravated by the fact that the aging process itself is associated with increased levels of inflammatory cytokines, making problems easier to trigger.

There are many conditions linked to food intolerance. These include arthritis, asthma, ADHD, bronchitis, chronic fatigue syndrome, coeliac disease, constipation, diarrhoea, fibromyalgia, headaches, insomnia, itchy skin problems and nasal congestion. While many of these problems are genetic and in many cases have no link to food intolerance, there are some cases where food intolerance exacerbates or is even the cause of the problem.

Food intolerance can develop slowly, the initial symptoms being lack of energy, brain fog and a general feeling of being unwell which can persist for years. In some cases, if the intolerance is not diagnosed and treated, the inflammation caused may develop into a more defined condition such as arthritis or eczema.

Basic checks for food intolerance

The most basic test for food intolerance is to remove the food from your diet, see if symptoms improve and then try reintroducing the food. If symptoms return, intolerance is likely. However this may not be as easy in practice as most people eat a huge variety of foods as part of the modern diet so discovering the offending food may take a lot of trial and error. Another stumbling block to this approach is that if you are intolerant to certain preservatives or colourings, it may be very difficult to discover which one you are allergic to as it may be an ingredient in many different and unrelated varieties of food and drink you consume.

If you're trying out elimination of a suspected food (e.g. dairy, grains, yeast) give it at least 7-10 days of strict avoidance to judge if there's a difference.

As dairy is the most common cause of food intolerance; it is good practice to temporarily remove dairy from your diet first to check if symptoms improve. Bear in mind, it is not just a case of removing milk from your diet, you need to remove all products made from dairy including cheese, cream, yogurt, butter, biscuits, cakes and even some breakfast cereals.

There are potentially some problems in completely excluding dairy products from your diet, not least that they contain important nutrients such as calcium and essential fatty acids. Milk substitutes such soya milk can still cause intolerance problems.

If you are planning to remove certain foods, speak to your pharmacist or doctor before doing, especially in cases where you may be losing out nutritionally, such as in the case of dairy products. You should not leave out foods for young children and infants without getting professional advice as this could have a profound impact on their growth and development.

Food intolerance checks

You can ask your GP about food intolerance testing. For example, if you suspect food intolerance, your doctor can do tests to confirm diagnosis including hydrogen breathe test, a lactose intolerance test, a milk intolerance test, a stool sample or a small bowel biopsy. Your GP may refer you to a specialist for these tests.

In Whelehan's pharmacy, we have introduced a food intolerance testing service which is done in our private consultation room. Our test involves us taking a finger prick sample of blood. We check the blood sample for IgG antibodies against foods that are the most likely cause of food intolerance. We can check for food intolerance to 59 of the most common causes of food intolerance. Our test ranks antibody levels by intensity; enabling development of a practical plan and hopefully allow the patient to feel better within a few days. If a patient tests positive, especially strongly positive, to any of the foods groups in the test, the simple act of eliminating the food could have a massive positive impact on their overall wellbeing. Our test costs €100. It takes a few minutes to perform and you can have your results in a few hours.

A nutritional therapist can help you design a nutritious diet to cope with even a big list of problem foods. In Whelehan's, we can refer you to a qualified nutritional therapist if you require further help.

When getting a food intolerance test, it is important to do so with a medical professional. Many food intolerance tests are not scientifically proven. It is not a good idea to buy a food intolerance test over the internet or from a practitioner who is not medically trained. There are many scams out there which you should be aware off.

How does Whelehans food intolerance test compare with other intolerance tests?

In Whelehans we are often asked if our food intolerance test as reliable as other food intolerance tests. The technology is the same. The purified antigens are the same. The only concession to convenience and cost is a smaller range of food antigens. However, the 50-odd items in the Food Detective cover the main culprits. So yes, the test is as good as anything on the market. Comparisons showed 95% overlap with laboratory-tested results.

Treatment of food intolerance

Food intolerance can be controlled simply by cutting the offending food out of the diet. Babies or young children with lactose intolerance can be given soya milk or hypoallergenic milk formula instead of cow's milk.

By Eamonn Brady (MPSI)

Adults may be able to tolerate small amounts of troublesome foods and may need to experiment to determine what they can and can't eat. Lactase enzyme drops or capsules can be used for lactose intolerance.

It is important that if foods are excluded from the diet, suitable alternatives are introduced to prevent nutrient deficiencies. A dietician or a nutritional therapist can give practical advice about how to achieve this. Speak to your GP or pharmacist to discuss any suspected food intolerances before putting a child on a restricted or elimination diet.

Perhaps food intolerance is not the problem

Even if you are diagnosed with food intolerance it may not be the cause of your symptoms. For example, perhaps you could be diagnosed with intolerance to citric fruit, but the real reason for your problems such as nausea and lack of energy could be stress and anxiety. It is in our nature to look for a "quick fix" to our problems, and it can be convenient to think that cutting out one food may relieve many of our daily health problems. It may not be as simple as that. Reducing stress for example, could be the solution to someone's problem, but this can be easier said than done in our hectic lives and can take a total change in the way we live. This is why, when getting food intolerance tests done, it is important to get them done with a medical professional who can recognise from your symptoms that food intolerance (whether diagnosed or not) may not be your only problem. It is important to take a holistic approach as our diet is only one factor in our overall wellbeing.

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