

Pollen allergy may cause food allergy (by Dr Michael Radcliffe).

A new kind of allergy is causing immediate symptoms in the lips, mouth and throat when sufferers eat fresh fruits and raw vegetables. It is called oral allergy syndrome and amongst adults in the UK it has become more common than food allergy due to peanuts or shellfish.

In almost every case, oral allergy syndrome is secondary to another type of allergy. In many cases the primary cause is allergy to pollen – *Pollen Food Syndrome* and in other cases the primary cause is allergy to natural rubber latex – *Latex Food Syndrome*.

Pollen Food Syndrome

Many hay fever sufferers who are sensitive to the proteins in pollens also react to similar proteins in fresh fruits, raw vegetables, and certain nuts.

The commonest pollen to cause the condition is birch pollen. For this reason, people with this condition usually suffer from hay fever during April and May. The birch pollen *allergen* (allergy-inducing protein) is similar to proteins that are present in the culprit foods, and this is why circulating birch pollen *antibodies* (immune attack proteins) mistakenly react the moment these foods are eaten causing allergy symptoms in the mouth, lips and throat. The scientific term for this condition is Pollen Food Syndrome.

Common symptoms include:

- Immediate redness, swelling or itching of lips, tongue, inside of mouth, soft palate and ears.
- Immediate itching in the throat; swelling in the throat is possible although it is not usually severe
- Occasionally symptoms in the oesophagus (gullet) or stomach can occur, including pain and discomfort, nausea and even vomiting

Most people are unlikely to ever have a severe reaction and mild reactions are unlikely to get worse over time. However, medical advice should be sought in all cases. This is particularly important if swelling has caused difficulty in swallowing or breathing, or if the symptoms include asthma.

The condition is more likely to develop in people who have had pollen allergy for some time. It is more frequently seen in adults than children, although it is becoming increasingly more common in children as hay fever develops at a younger age.

Up to three quarters of those sensitised to birch pollen have the condition although many may not realise it. In its mildest form there may only be a sensation in the lips or tongue after eating fresh fruit. Occasionally people without hay fever suffer the symptoms, and when tested, the birch antibody is found to be present even though birch pollen doesn't cause them any symptoms.

The other pollen that less commonly causes symptoms is grass pollen and people who are sensitive to both birch and grass pollens often suffer symptoms to a wide range of the implicated foods. Weed pollens such as mugwort can also act as a trigger.

The commonest foods to cause symptoms are fresh fruits (apples, apricots, pears, cherries, kiwi, mango, plums, peaches, nectarines and tomatoes), raw vegetables (carrots, celery and peppers), hazelnut, almond and walnut. A number of other plant foods may occasionally cause the condition including raw legumes (such as mange tout and raw peas) and certain spices. People have reported nose and eye symptoms and itchy hands when handling uncooked potatoes, carrots or parsnips.

Pollen Food Syndrome

Another type of oral allergy syndrome affects some people who suffer from natural rubber latex allergy. Latex allergy is particularly common amongst people who come into regular contact with latex such as healthcare workers.

Because some latex allergens are similar to the allergens in certain foods, people who are allergic to latex might also find they react to foods such as apple, avocado, banana, carrot, celery and chestnut. The scientific term for this condition is Latex Food Syndrome.

The symptoms are similar as those described for Pollen Food Syndrome.

Similar Allergic Conditions

Allergic reactions to fruit and vegetables are not always related to pollen or latex. In some cases, there is a primary allergy to the food itself. These reactions may be more severe.

Symptoms in the mouth can also be caused by primary food allergy (i.e. it is not secondary to pollen or latex allergy). Examples are peanuts, tree nuts, egg white, prawns and fish. Primary food allergy has the potential to be much more serious.

Any reaction to a food should be investigated by your GP. Mild symptoms should not be ignored. The GP should be able to decide what type of food allergy you have and whether you need to be referred to an Allergy Consultant.

Diagnosis and Management

The correct identification and avoidance of the culprit food or foods must be the main aim. Previous experience of what has happened when eating certain foods is the most important evidence. Skin and blood tests can help to confirm the diagnosis, and may help a doctor to identify the occasional patient for whom there is a risk of a severe reaction and who will therefore be advised to carry adrenaline injection as a precaution.

It does not necessarily follow that all the foods of a particular group will cause trouble for someone who reacts to one or two of them. Unless you are advised otherwise, only the foods that have caused symptoms need to be avoided. But you should stay alert to the possibility that sensitivities to other foods in the same group might develop in the future. When trying a fruit or vegetable for the first time, it is best to be cautious. Rub the lip with a small amount and chew a small portion and spit it out. Wait for 15 minutes to see if any symptoms develop.

Once you are sure that a particular food is causing symptoms (and especially if tests confirm the allergy) it is important to exclude it in future. However, eating the same food when cooked may not cause any problem.

Desensitisation treatment for oral allergy syndrome is not available at the present time, although it may become available in the future.

For individual allergy advice,
speak with Dr. Michael Radcliffe at Greatvine.com

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