



NEWS RELEASE

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By Anna Martin
Nutrition, Family and Consumer Sciences Advisor
UCCE San Joaquin County

Food Allergy Basics

- 2 to 2 1/2 percent of the general population suffers from food allergy, or between 6-7 million Americans. Up to 3 million Americans suffer from peanut or tree nut allergy.
- 8 foods account for 90 percent of the allergic reactions. They include peanuts, tree nuts (walnuts, pecans, etc.), fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, soy, and wheat.
- Peanuts are the leading cause of severe allergic reactions, followed by shellfish, fish, tree nuts, and eggs.
- Physicians are reporting an increase in the number of food-allergic patients in the country.
- Individuals with food allergies and asthma appear to be at an increased risk for severe allergic reaction.
- Most individuals that have had a reaction ate a food that they thought was safe.
- Food allergy is the leading cause of anaphylaxis outside the hospital setting, accounting for an estimated 30,000 emergency room visits and 2,000 hospitalizations each year.
- It is estimated that as many as 150-200 people die each year from food allergy-related reactions; approximately 50 people die from insect sting reactions.

1. What happens in the body during a food-allergic reaction?

The immune system mistakenly believes that a harmless substance, in this case a food item, is harmful. In its attempt to protect the body, it creates specific IgE antibodies to that food. These antibodies attach themselves to cells called "mast cells." When the individual eats that food, the food attaches itself to the antibody, causing the mast cell to explode and release massive amounts of chemicals and histamines throughout the body. These chemicals trigger a cascade of allergic symptoms that can affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin, or cardiovascular system.

2. What are the common symptoms of a reaction?

Symptoms range from a tingling sensation in the mouth, swelling of the tongue and the throat, difficulty breathing, hives, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, drop in blood pressure, loss of consciousness, to death. Symptoms typically appear within minutes to two hours after the person has eaten the food to which he or she is allergic.

3. What is the best treatment for food allergy?

Strict avoidance of the allergy-causing food is the only way to avoid a reaction. Reading ingredient labels for all foods is the key to maintaining control over the allergy. If a product doesn't have a label, allergic individuals should not eat that food. If the label contains unfamiliar terms, shoppers must call the manufacturer and ask for a definition or avoid eating that food.

4. What is the best treatment for a food allergy reaction?

Epinephrine, also called adrenaline, is the medication of choice for controlling a reaction. It is available by prescription in an EpiPen® auto injector.

5. What is the difference between food allergy and food intolerance?

Many people think the terms food allergy and food intolerance mean the same thing; however, they do not. A food intolerance is a metabolic disorder and does not involve the immune system. Lactose intolerance is one example of a food intolerance. A person with lactose intolerance lacks an enzyme that is needed to digest milk sugar. When the person eats milk products, symptoms such as gas, bloating, and abdominal pain may occur.

A food allergy occurs when the immune system reacts to a certain food protein. The most common form of an immune system reaction occurs when the body creates immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies to the food. When these IgE antibodies react with the food, histamine and other chemicals (called mediators) cause hives, asthma, or other symptoms of an allergic reaction.

Source: Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN); <http://www.foodallergy.org>