
The Foods We Hate To Love: Food Allergies and Food Intolerances

By Cristi Lewis, CHom.

Achoo! SNERK! Oh boy, here we go again. Those itchy eyes and runny nose are back to make us miserable. Or maybe it's that patch of dry, itchy skin that just doesn't go away no matter how many creams and lotions you've tried. Whether it's you or your child, allergies are a miserable experience. However, did you ever stop and think that those stuffed up sinuses could be caused by the foods you've been eating?

Let's be clear; food allergies and food intolerances are two different conditions. Food intolerance is an inability for digestive enzymes to break down a particular food protein. Common symptoms therefore include bloating, stomach pains, diarrhea, cramping, nausea, and vomiting. Food allergies, on the other hand, involve a reaction by the immune system to a food protein when it comes in contact with the skin, mucous membranes, or after it has passed through the digestive system. These symptoms include itching, eye tearing and mucous production, inflammation, and tingling. Common ailments such as eczema and asthma have been attributed to food allergies, and more severe reactions caused by internal inflammation can lead to airway obstruction and anaphylactic shock. A person who is severely allergic to a particular food usually knows it (having ended up in the emergency room at least once), but the majority of us who may think we have seasonal allergies or a skin reaction to something in the environment may not realize that our symptoms are due to what we eat for breakfast.

There are 8 major foods that have been identified as the worst culprits in terms of allergic or intolerance reactions: milk, eggs, soy, wheat, peanuts, fish, shellfish, and tree nuts. The first six are the allergies most common in children, the last four most commonly affecting adults. Of course, if your children have food intolerances to these substances, it may be simply a case of their digestive systems not being sophisticated enough to handle these types of foods. As their digestive systems develop they may "grow out" of their sensitivities and be able to eat them later in life. But for those with allergic reactions, they are with them for life and may pass them on to their kids. In fact, parents who have one or more allergies have children with a higher incidence of allergies, eczema and asthma.

The incidence of people with food allergies and food intolerances is steadily increasing in our world today. Why and how did we get to the point of our food making us sick? It may be a combination of factors in our modern era that cumulatively make us more susceptible than in the past. Historically, humans have had a much more varied diet than we receive today in our developed nations. People in ancient times ate a huge variety of wild foods that were available in their local area and gathered seasonally. From the estimated 8000 different species of foods that used to comprise our diet, we went down to an estimated 8 today (mostly corn, wheat, and soy). So is it any wonder that when our immune and digestive systems detect a huge abundance of wheat proteins in our bodies, they mistake it for an invasive microbe that must be trying to take over?

Additionally, we have our genes to thank for the type of foods that make us sick. People whose ancestors come from Northern Europe are more likely to be able to drink milk and eat cheese, whereas people with a South American heritage will most likely have no trouble eating mangos and bananas. Our genetics evolved in places where specific types of foods were abundant and useful to eat for our survival. People would have frozen to death in Amsterdam without the extra fat provided by dairy products. But in today's global society, we can eat Chinese, Italian, and Ethiopian foods, all in the same week! If our genes lack the ability to make the enzymes to digest food proteins they didn't evolve with, then yep, you guessed it; food intolerance or an allergic reaction.

Most of us also live in a society that is very germ and dirt phobic. Our houses are getting more and more efficient at keeping heated or cooled air in and fresh air out. We use antibacterial soaps and hand sanitizers to the point of worship, and can even buy clothes, paints, and furniture that have antimicrobial chemicals built in. Most children don't even realize that the foods in the supermarket once grew in good old dirt. While public sanitation measures have drastically reduced communicable disease and extended our lives decades longer, we may be isolating our immune systems from the natural organisms that they evolved to fight on a daily basis. This is the basis of the "hygiene hypothesis"; in other words, immune systems with nothing to do start attacking the proteins in our foods out of the need to perform their functions and nothing to perform them on!

Luckily, there are a wide variety of options, both conventional and holistic, for people to lead somewhat normal and symptom-free lives. The following is an action plan that tackles the difficult balancing act of eating good foods with ensuring good health:

1) Identify the problem foods. The simplest way to do this from home is through an elimination diet. By starting with a very simple diet of non-allergenic foods (rice, beans, meat, and certain vegetables) for a few days, you gradually begin to add in foods that you suspect are the source of the problem. When your symptoms come back, you know that you've found the culprit. A good nutritionist can help oversee the process and guide you to which foods are the least likely to be allergenic. This may work better for those with food intolerances. People with allergies may wish to visit an allergist and have a "scratch test" performed. Small amounts of allergenic material are placed under the skin. If there is a reaction, then your body's immune system sees it as an invader. Blood tests can also detect the presence of antibodies to certain substances, but are not as specific as the scratch test.

2) Reduce your environmental exposure. Once you know what it is you are allergic to, do your best to avoid it. Educate yourself about food labels and what those different chemicals mean. Certain food products, such as casein and whey, are made from allergenic foods (in this case, milk), so consumers need to know the code words for the foods they are derived from. Better yet, begin cooking at home! By using whole food ingredients and taking the time to prepare your own meals, you know exactly what is going into your mouth. Plus, there is the added benefit of eating fresher, more nutritious foods that you can share with your loved ones. And make sure that both your living and working environments are as clean and healthy as you can make it. Often if you are exposed to other environmental allergens (dust mites, mold, cockroaches, cleaning chemicals, animal dander), chances are your food intolerances or allergies will flare up due to the added stress on your immune system. If you are pregnant or nursing, avoiding the more allergenic foods can reduce exposure to your growing children. And breastfeeding is the single most important preventative measure you can give to your child's health! Since children are born with a sterile digestive system and can receive protective antibodies through your breast milk, the chances that breastfed babies will develop food allergies or intolerances are much less than formula fed children.

3) Support your whole body. While conventional pharmaceutical medicine has a wide array of drugs to control and suppress symptoms in the short term (which may be very necessary in the case of asthma attacks or anaphylactic shock), for your long term health you need a plan that addresses the whole body's state of health. Proper nutrition, ideally from whole foods which are organically and locally grown, is essential in giving your body the building blocks to keep your immune and digestive systems healthy. Nutritional supplementation can also help an already stressed system recover. Immune

system supplements that include omega 3s, vitamins A, E, and C, zinc and copper can do just that. Colostrum supplementation (from organic sources) has also shown to improve immune response in susceptible individuals. Holistic medical treatments such as homeopathy, chiropractic care, and acupuncture are all effective in helping your body maintain its internal balance and create the conditions for the optimum functioning of your body. Seek out experienced and knowledgeable practitioners belonging to well-known organizations.

4) Enjoy your food experiences! Food allergies and intolerances may seem a hindrance to our need-it-now-get-everything-I-want society, but that doesn't mean that you have to give up your social life to have a quality life. More and more restaurants are becoming sensitive to the needs of allergenic people, and there is a greater variety of vegetarian and organic based restaurants that are sympathetic to your lifestyle needs. Cooking at home also gives you the excuse to host dinner parties where your guests can have fun helping prepare the meal, and pot lucks (with you requesting dishes sans allergic ingredients) can help nourish souls as well as bodies. Instead of viewing your food allergies and intolerances as obstacles, see them as opportunities to learn new skills, strengthen relationships, and bring true lasting health to your life.

Resources:

www.acaai.org Website of the American College of Asthma, Allergies, and Immunology. Great scientific information on your immune system and resources for finding an allergist.

www.foodallergy.org Website of the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network. Information, advocacy, and research on food allergens, along with kids' and teens' pages.

www.foodallergyinitiative.org Website of the Food Allergy Initiative. Food allergy information and resources for the allergic individual.

Pascal, Cybele. *The Whole Foods Allergy Cookbook*. Ridgefield, CT: Vital Health Publishing, 2006

Sheppard, Jane. *Super Health Kids, Strengthening Your Child's Resistance to Disease*. A great holistic book that covers all aspects of children's holistic health. See www.healthychild.com for ordering information.

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