



Food Allergy Basics

- A food allergy is an **immune system response to a food protein** that the body mistakenly believes is harmful. When the individual eats food containing that protein, the immune system releases massive amounts of chemicals, triggering symptoms that can affect a person's breathing, gastrointestinal tract, skin and/or heart.
- Symptoms of food allergy can include; hives, swelling of the lips, face and eyes, swelling of the tongue, breathing difficulty, abdominal pain, vomiting or a sudden drop in blood pressure. If left untreated, these symptoms can be fatal.
- It is estimated that up to 2% of Australians, including **1 in 20 children** suffer from food allergies and some of them will experience a life-threatening (anaphylactic) reaction.
- **There are nine foods that account for the majority of food allergic reactions:** peanuts, tree nuts (walnuts, almonds, cashews, pistachios, pecans, etc.), fish, crustacea (prawns, lobster, crab etc), eggs, milk, sesame, soy and wheat.
- Peanuts are the leading cause of severe allergic reactions, followed by tree nuts, crustacea, fish and milk.
- Currently, there is no cure for food allergy. Avoidance of the food is the only way to prevent a reaction.
- Adrenaline is the first line treatment for severe allergic reactions and can be administered via an auto-injector called the EpiPen®.
- Food allergy is the leading cause of (severe reactions) anaphylaxis outside the hospital setting.
- Approximately 10 people die from anaphylactic reactions each year in Australia.



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COMMON MYTHS ABOUT FOOD ALLERGY

Myth: Food allergies are not real.

Fact: Food allergies are real and involve the body's immune system. With food allergy, the immune system misinterprets a food protein as a harmful invader and releases histamine and other chemicals to protect the body from harm. Symptoms can include hives, swelling, vomiting, diarrhoea, and respiratory distress.

Myth: The terms food "allergy" and "intolerance" mean the same thing.

Fact: Whereas food allergy involves the immune system, food intolerance is caused by an enzyme deficiency. Lactose intolerance is an example. A person with lactose intolerance lacks an enzyme that is needed to digest milk sugar. When the person ingests milk products, symptoms such as gas, bloating and abdominal pain may occur.

Myth: Food allergies are not life threatening.

Fact: Approximately 10 people die each year in Australia due to allergic reactions and some of these are due to food.

Myth: Food additives and artificial flavours cause the majority of food-allergic reactions.

Fact: Contrary to common belief, natural foods account for the majority of allergic reactions. The foods that cause 90 % of allergic reactions are peanuts, milk, eggs, sesame, soy, tree nuts (e.g. cashews, almonds, walnuts,) fish, crustacea and wheat.

Myth: Each allergic reaction to food becomes increasingly worse.

Fact: The severity of a reaction is based on a number of factors including the amount of food ingested and whether the person is unwell at the time. An individual with food allergy may experience a mild or severe reaction.