Food Allergies: Avoidance Is the Answer

If your immune system reacts to a certain food — a food that others enjoy harmlessly — you have a food allergy. For some reason, your body produces antibodies to fight substances in the food item, and the next time the food enters your body, your immune system reacts with an allergic reaction. If your food allergy is severe, simply touching the food or breathing particles of it might cause a reaction.

Children most frequently are allergic to milk, eggs, peanuts, wheat, soy and tree nuts. Adults most commonly are allergic to peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish. This handout explains how to recognize and live with allergies to nuts, wheat and cow's milk, which are very common.

Symptoms

Among the most common signs and symptoms of a food allergy are the following:

- hives and itching
- wheezing, nasal congestion and other breathing troubles
- stomach pain, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting
- dizziness, lightheadedness and fainting
- swelling, especially of the lips, face, tongue and throat.

These symptoms usually develop within an hour or so of eating the food.

A severe allergic reaction to a food is called anaphylaxis. Symptoms are more extreme and can include constricted airway, a swollen throat, shock and a steep blood pressure drop, rapid pulse, and loss of consciousness.

Living With Food Allergies

There is only one way to prevent an allergic reaction: Avoid the offending food. You also must avoid any foods that might contain the substance you're allergic to (such as peanuts or wheat gluten or milk). To do so, you'll have to read food labels carefully. The substance you are allergic to may be "hidden" because it may be listed in more than one way. Manufacturers often change recipes, so be sure to check the label every time you eat the food. With your NP, discuss what you can and cannot eat.

Parents of children with food allergies should make key people aware of the allergies. Child care providers, school personnel and friends' parents should know what foods the child cannot eat and what to do in an emergency. People with severe allergies also should talk to their NP about carrying medication to treat anaphylaxis.

Nut Allergy

If you have a nut allergy, you cannot eat peanuts or any type of tree nuts, such as almonds, pecans and walnuts. Peanut butter (or any other nut butter) is another no-no. Also off limits are almond paste, nougat, nut oil and nut extracts.

Foods that may contain nuts include trail mix; African, Chinese, Thai and other ethnic dishes; cookies, candy, pastries and other baked goods; grain breads; ice cream and frozen desserts; cereal and granola; and salad dressing. Check for hydrolyzed plant protein and hydrolyzed vegetable protein on all recipe labels, since they may contain peanuts.

Wheat Allergy

Wheat proteins, called gluten, are an allergen for many people. If you are allergic to gluten, you must avoid all wheat products, such as flour, bran, semolina and vegetable starch. Most types of bread, cookies, cakes and other baked goods, as well as crackers, many cereals and pasta, contain wheat.

Many wheat products are now available in gluten-free forms.

Milk Allergy

If you have a cow's milk allergy, you must avoid all milk and dairy products, including cream, sour cream, yogurt, cheese, butter and even artificial butter flavoring. Look for the following ingredients on labels, since they contain milk or dairy: lactalbumin, lactalbumin phosphate, lactoglobulin, casein, sodium caseinate and lactose.

Foods that contain milk or dairy include au gratin foods, chocolate and cream candy, coffee creamers, mashed potatoes, custard, nougat, ice cream, sherbet, cake and cake mixes, and some margarines, pudding and salad dressings.

As milk substitutes, try soy, rice or almond milk, or eat nondairy ice cream, chocolate, cheese or yogurt. But be careful with soy milk, since soy also is a common allergen.

Some information adapted from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (www.niaid.nih.gov).

Additional Notes:

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