

What is food allergy?

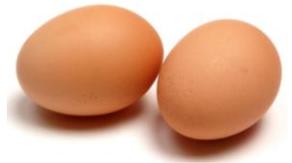
A food allergy is an adverse immune response to a food protein. A reaction occurs when the body's immune system mistakenly identifies a food protein as harmful. When this happens, the immune system thinks the individual is under attack and triggers an allergic reaction.

What sort of reactions can occur?

Reactions usually occur immediately after the offending food has been eaten. The types of reactions vary depending on the severity of the child's allergy and the amount of allergen consumed. Reactions may be a sudden rash around the mouth, redness and swelling of the face and may lead to itchy hives, breathing difficulties, vomiting and/or anaphylactic shock. Food allergy can also occur in the form of persistent eczema on the face and arms where the link with food is not always obvious.

How common is it?

Food allergy is most common in infants and young children. The onset is usually in the first year of life and is most common in children suffering from eczema. Approximately 6% of children in the 0- 5-year age group have a food allergy. The most common allergenic foods are egg, milk, peanut, tree nuts, sesame, wheat, soy, fish and seafood. Young children with food allergy are often allergic to multiple foods but from around five years of age this usually reduces to only one or two foods.



Can children grow out of food allergy?

Fortunately, most children grow out of milk, egg, soy and wheat allergies before they reach school age. However, peanut, tree nuts and seafood allergies often persist into adulthood.

Diagnosis and treatment

Children suffering from an allergy should be appropriately diagnosed by an allergy specialist or immunologist using reliable tests.



When children are allergic to staple foods such as dairy or grain products it can cause a significant nutritional impact on their diet. The family should seek dietary advice from an Accredited Practising Dietitian to ensure optimal nutrition and appropriate food substitutes.

Can food allergy be prevented?

Effective allergy prevention strategies remain limited despite ongoing research. In the meantime, the Australian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy* states that:

- Breastfeeding during the period that foods are first introduced may help prevent the development of allergy to those foods.
- Avoiding allergenic foods does not appear to reduce allergies, and may even be associated with an increased risk (further research is ongoing in this area).

*Source: ASCIA Infant Feeding Advice 2010