



FOOD ALLERGIES

Summary

Not everything we eat agrees with us. About 4-8% children and 2-3% of adult New Zealanders are affected by food allergies. A food allergy can take minutes or hours to develop, involves the immune system and can trigger an attack. Food allergies are often connected with foods such as nuts, milk, eggs and shellfish.

Intolerant means a person is unable to eat a food without having problems afterwards. A food intolerance does not involve the immune system. Someone intolerant may have a bad reaction to a food because they can't process it normally. The symptoms may take longer to develop. Food intolerances are often connected to milk foods and foods that contain gluten. People who are allergic or intolerant to certain foods can read the packaging of food products to make sure they avoid unwanted reactions.

What's the difference between a food allergy and a food intolerance?

Food allergies happen when someone's immune system over-reacts to a substance (called an **allergen**) in their food by making a special group of antibodies which produce the symptoms of an allergy. Allergies can take minutes or hours to develop and be mild or severe. Many of us grow out of allergies but some last for life. It can take only a tiny amount of allergen to cause a reaction - eating something that has been in contact with an allergen (like a nut biscuit on a shared plate) can trigger an attack in a very sensitive person.

Food intolerances don't involve the immune system. Someone intolerant may have a bad reaction to a food because they can't process it normally: with lactose intolerance the enzyme which breaks down lactose often isn't working well. For most intolerances we need to eat a certain amount of a food before symptoms appear, so people can often eat small amounts of a trigger food and their symptoms take longer to develop than with allergies.

What foods cause them?

Eight food types cause over 90% of food allergies: Peanuts, tree nuts (nuts like almonds, brazils, hazelnuts, walnuts), cow's milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, soy, and wheat. Sesame and lupin (a legume often used in imported gluten free foods) are common allergens# in NZ.

NZ Food Standard 1.2.3 says common substances that must be identified include cereals containing gluten (wheat, rye, barley, oats, spelt), crustacea (crab, prawn, shrimp, crayfish), eggs, fish, milk, peanut, soybean, sesame, tree nuts other than coconut, lupin (from 26/5/18), or sulphites (at concentrations over 10 mg/kg).





What are the signs and symptoms?

Allergic reactions can range from mild to life-threatening. They include problems with:

- * skin (itching, rashes, swelling)
- *breathing (sneezing, hayfever, cough, asthma)
- * digestion (cramps, diarrhoea, vomiting)
- * circulation (dizziness, low blood pressure)

Anaphylactic shock is a severe allergic response affecting one or more body systems. It can cause swollen airways, reduced blood pressure and trouble breathing and needs urgent medical attention as it is often life-threatening.

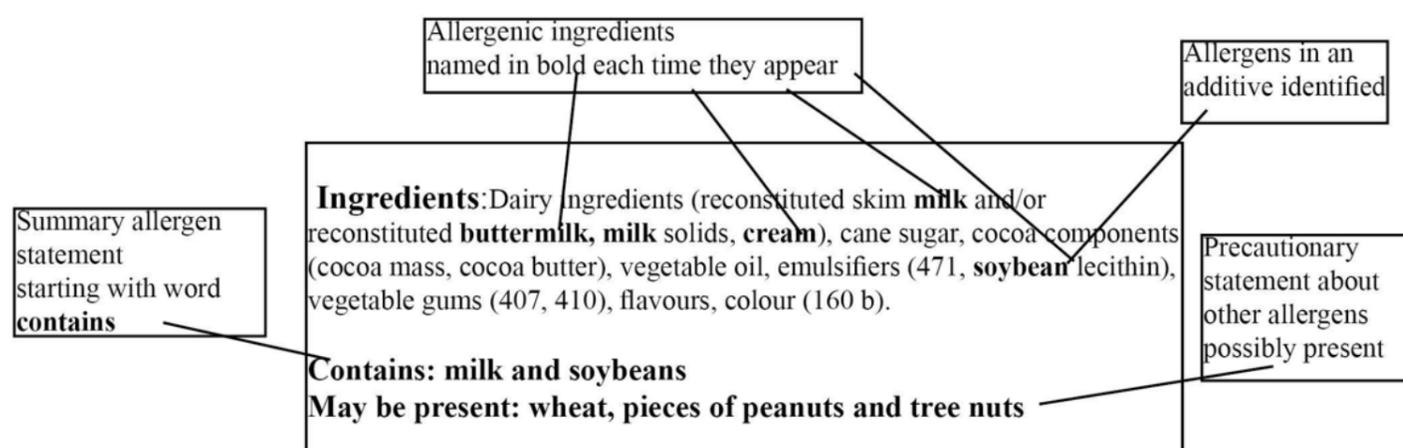
Intolerance reactions can seem like allergies or other disorders, and include problems with:

- * skin (rashes, swelling)
- * breathing (stuffy/runny nose, asthma)
- * digestion (bloating, gas, colic, diarrhoea)
- * migraine/headache, irritability, tiredness

It's best to get a health professional to test for allergies or intolerances. They can do this in a safe and standard way and give advice on the best way to manage reactions.

What do food labels have to say about allergens?

Our Food Standards Code (FSC) requires food labels to identify and name certain substances like common allergens[#] (or their products) if they're used in foods or to process them. They will be listed in brackets, in normal or bold font in ingredient lists, and also on a separate line after the words "Contains" like on this label from a chocolate ice cream bar.



If you're allergic or sensitive to something less common (like cinnamon or mustard) you'll need to read ingredient lists carefully as they don't have to follow these rules.

What do “may contain traces of” and similar words on labels really mean?

Food manufacturers may also put voluntary statements (“precautionary statements”) on their packaging. They’re phrases like: “may contain”, “may contain traces of”, “manufactured in a plant that also processes”, “manufactured on equipment that handles”, “produced in a factory handling”, “produced on the same production line as products containing” followed by the name of common allergens. They all mean that although the manufacturer didn’t add or use the named allergen – and there may be none present in a food – they can’t guarantee that what you’re eating hasn’t been contaminated with it. For someone with a severe food allergy it’s best to avoid products with such warnings as even the tiniest bit of cross-contamination can cause a serious reaction.

Some foods are made to replace or reduce substances people are sensitive or allergic to (like gluten or lactose). Even if they claim to be “X free”, it’s still a good idea to check their ingredient lists, statements, and that they’re not usually made up by adding a trigger food.

What can you do to deal with food allergies?

- Look out for yourself and friends: get immediate help if someone has a bad food reaction.
- Read labels, precautionary statements, warnings and ingredient lists carefully.
- If you eat out or go to someone’s house, don’t be afraid to ask what’s in your food, what it’s been cooked in, or how it’s been prepared: if in doubt, and if you have severe allergies, avoid anything that might contain an allergen.
- If you think a common allergen hasn’t been declared on a label contact the Ministry for Primary Industries MPI (Food Safety) as they can recall it. Allergy New Zealand keeps an updated list of allergen-related recalls on their website .

References

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