

## Food Allergies Are on the Rise: How to Recognize and Treat Them

You may have heard about the Canadian teen with the severe peanut allergy. Doctors speculated that her death in November 2005 may have been the result of a kiss from her boyfriend, who had just eaten a peanut butter snack. While the coroner has since ruled out her allergy as cause of death, stories like this frighten those with food allergies (especially parents of allergic children). Increased media coverage of the topic begs these questions: Why does it seem there are more food allergies today? And how can we protect ourselves and our children?

While about 25 percent of the population believes they have a food allergy, only 2 percent of adults, and 6 to 8 percent of children under the age of three, truly do. However, it is true that food allergies have increased over the last 20 years.

According to Suzanne Teuber, professor of rheumatology, allergy and clinical immunology at the University of California Davis School of Medicine, one theory as to why allergies are increasing is that people raise their children under cleaner conditions, and we are not exposed to the same germs as we were in prior generations.

Teuber notes that **peanut** allergies in particular have increased among children, affecting one out of every 100 kids. Also, **seafood** allergies now inflict two out of every 100 children. Other common food allergens include **milk, eggs, tree nuts (e.g., walnuts, cashews), soy, and wheat.**

### Symptoms

Reactions from food allergies range from those that affect your skin like hives, welts, redness or itching, to those that involve your digestive system, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or stomach cramps. Some individuals experience respiratory problems that cause wheezing, cough, or runny nose. Symptoms can vary from mild to severe.

Food allergies can even be life-threatening. A condition known as **anaphylaxis**, which causes breathing problems and loss of consciousness, can be fatal without quick treatment. It usually occurs within minutes after contact with an allergen; however it can be up to two hours before symptoms appear. Reactions typically include one or more of the following:

- Tingling sensation in the mouth
- Swelling of the tongue and throat
- Difficulty breathing
- Hives
- Vomiting
- Abdominal cramps
- Diarrhea
- Drop in blood pressure

### Diagnosis

If you or a loved one experiences symptoms that seem to indicate a food allergy, schedule an appointment with your primary care physician, who can evaluate your situation and prescribe medication as necessary. In some situations, your doctor may refer you to an allergy doctor who specializes in these conditions. Doctors can determine allergens by asking you to keep a food diary and eliminate certain foods from your diet, or they may perform skin and blood tests.

### Treatment

Treatment depends first on a clear diagnosis and only your doctor can recommend what's right for you. Be sure to alert him or her to any changes and be sure to discuss your options thoroughly. Here are some points to consider:

- **Prevention** is, of course, the best cure. But while it's easy to avoid an allergen such as milk by not consuming dairy products, it can be trickier when allergens are "hidden" in foods. Be sure to read [labels](#) and be sure to ask restaurants to identify ingredients in their prepared foods. For more information on food labeling, go to: the AAFA Web site at <http://www.aafa.org/display.cfm?id=9&sub=20&cont=537>>.
- Wear a **medical alert bracelet**. This is especially helpful for children who may not be able to explain their allergy.
- Carry an **epinephrine syringe**. Also known as "EpiPens", these syringes are available by prescription and can be used to quickly stop an allergic reaction, so you have time to get emergency medical help.

### **Allergy Alerts**

Food companies often release notices of mislabeled or recalled products, as well as ingredient changes. The Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN) sends these alerts via e-mail. To sign up, visit the FAAN Web site at <http://www.foodallergy.org/maillinglist1.html>>.

Think you or a family has a food allergy? Want more help in understanding your condition? Call a LifeSteps health coach at **1-877-LIFE-123 (1-877-543-3123), 24 hours a day, seven days a week.**

*Sources: Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network; Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America; U.S. Food and Drug Administration*