

# Busting the Myths and Knowing the Facts About Food Allergy



This sheet addresses some of the most common questions about food allergies.

## What Is a Food Allergy?

A food allergy is when your body's immune system reacts to a certain food. Your body thinks that food (the allergen) is a threat and tries to attack it. This response can cause a range of symptoms.

**? Myth: Food allergies are not that serious.**

**✓ Fact: Food allergies can be a life-threatening disease.**

They are more than just an itch or a stomachache. Food allergy can cause symptoms such as hives, coughing, swelling of the face and tongue, difficulty breathing, and loss of consciousness. Food allergies are not only life-threatening, they are also life-altering. People with food allergy must always be vigilant to avoid foods they are allergic to.



**? Myth: Eating a little bit of a food that you are allergic to won't hurt you.**

**✓ Fact: Even a trace amount of a food allergen can cause a severe reaction called anaphylaxis in some people.**

The food a person is allergic to must be completely removed from their diet for them to stay safe and live well. Avoiding cross-contact between a safe food and a food allergen is just as important as avoiding the allergen itself. Cross-contact happens when a food that someone is allergic to accidentally touches another safe food someone is going to eat. That food, which was safe, is now dangerous for the person with a food allergy.

## What Is Anaphylaxis (a-nuh-fuh-LAK-suhs)?

Anaphylaxis is a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction that can happen after you've been exposed to something you're allergic to, including a food.

**? Myth: Each reaction will get worse and worse.**

**✓ Fact: Food allergy reactions are unpredictable.**

The way a person's body reacts to a food one time can't predict how they will react the next time. There is no way to know if a reaction is going to be mild, moderate, or severe. People with a food allergy should always be prepared with emergency medication, just in case.

**? Myth: Food allergies are the same as food intolerances.**

**✓ Fact: Food intolerance does not involve an immune system reaction.**

While food intolerances can cause great discomfort, they are not life-threatening. Food allergy, on the other hand, can be fatal.



 **Myth: If a food allergy test is positive, you have a food allergy.**

 **Fact: Positive skin prick or blood test results for a food allergy are not always accurate and can sometimes give “false positive” results.**

This means that the test is “positive” even though you are not allergic to the food being tested. An Oral Food Challenge (OFC) is the gold standard of tests and should be discussed with a board-certified allergist. An OFC happens in the doctor’s office and involves eating the suspected food allergen to see if a reaction happens.

 **Myth: Peanut allergy is the most dangerous food allergy.**

 **Fact: No single food allergy poses a greater threat than another.**

While 9 foods account for most food allergies in the U.S., virtually any food can cause an allergic reaction. Even a very small amount of the problem food is enough to cause a reaction.

 **Myth: A food allergy always develops in childhood.**

 **Fact: A food allergy can occur at any age, well into adulthood.**

You can even develop an allergy to a food you have safely eaten many times before. In fact, about half of people who have a food allergy to shellfish experience their first allergic reaction as an adult.<sup>1</sup>

 **Myth: Antihistamines will stop an allergic reaction.**

 **Fact: Antihistamines (like Benadryl® or Zyrtec®) can help relieve some symptoms like an itchy mouth or skin, but they DO NOT stop anaphylaxis.**

Epinephrine is the only approved medication to stop anaphylaxis and should be given **first** and **fast**.

 **Myth: Once you develop a food allergy, you cannot outgrow it.**

 **Fact: It is possible to outgrow your food allergies with age.**

For example, many children outgrow food allergies to milk, soy, eggs, and wheat. However, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish are less likely to be outgrown.

 **Myth: If you don’t have an allergic reaction within 30 minutes of being exposed to your allergen, you won’t have one.**

 **Fact: Symptoms can start within a few seconds of eating a food allergen, but it can take up to 2 hours for symptoms to appear.**

Sometimes, after the first symptoms go away, a second round of symptoms can occur without re-exposure to the allergen. This can happen between 1 and 48 hours after the first symptoms (or sometimes longer), even after treatment has been given.<sup>2</sup> This second set of symptoms is called a biphasic reaction.

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1. Warren CM, Aktas ON, Gupta RS, Davis CM. Prevalence and characteristics of adult shellfish allergy in the United States. J Allergy Clin Immunol. 2019 Nov;144(5):1435-1438.e5. doi: 10.1016/j.jaci.2019.07.031. Epub 2019 Aug 8. PMID: 31401288; PMCID: PMC6842441.

2. Ichikawa M, Kuriyama A, Urushidani S, Ikegami T. Incidence and timing of biphasic anaphylactic reactions: a retrospective cohort study. Acute Med Surg. 2021 Jul 30;8(1): e689. doi: 10.1002/ams2.689. PMID: 34354840; PMCID: PMC8323456.