

Food Allergies

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To some children food allergies are only minor inconveniences, but to others they can cause chronic health complaints, and in extreme cases, life threatening reactions.

Food allergies are hard to diagnose. Not all children have the same reactions to the same allergen. There are also a range of health conditions that may be caused by allergies. These include eczema, asthma, colic, migraine headaches, and hyperactivity.

Symptoms of food allergies usually appear within the first year of a child's life and may disappear within nine months or less. It is not unusual for children to outgrow their allergies. It has also been proven that children will be more likely to have allergies if their parents do, although they won't necessarily be the same allergy.

If a child is truly allergic to a food, the body's immune system reacts to contact with the food (allergen) by making antibodies. Antibodies are formed to defend the body against the allergen. This defense will be displayed through reactions which may include, hives, vomiting, eczema, diarrhea, sneezing, coughing, swelling of the throat, nasal congestion, wheezing, and anaphylactic shock. These reactions may happen within a few minutes of eating the food or can take up to several days to appear. The severity of the reaction is dependant upon how much of the allergen was eaten, how often the food was eaten, and physical or emotional stress.

The foods that are most likely to cause allergies in children are cow's milk, wheat, eggs, and corn. Soy products, oranges, chocolate, peanuts, legumes, rice, fish, beef, pork, and chicken are other possible allergens.

Children can also have sensitivities or intolerances to food. These are often confused with allergies. Intolerances and sensitivities are not as serious as allergies and will not cause life threatening reactions, but can be very uncomfortable for a child to deal with. An example of an intolerance would be lactose intolerance in which the body is unable to digest the sugars in milk. A sensitivity would be the sensitivity to food colorings.

If a food allergy is suspected it is important that the child has a professional evaluate the situation. It is unnecessary for a child to suffer from allergy related symptoms or for a child to avoid an enjoyable food that may not be a problem for them. Children can develop aversions to eating when they've been scared by a severe allergic reaction or when restrictions make meal times unpleasant. Highly restrictive diets can be boring and can lead to serious nutrient deficiencies if they aren't well planned. It is important to replace the nutrients that will be missing from a child's diet when they have to restrict certain foods. For those children with milk allergies their diets will lack protein, calcium, and riboflavin. Children with egg allergies will need to supplement protein and vitamin A in their diets. Those with wheat allergies will need to supplement complex carbohydrates, B-vitamins, and fiber.

There are alternative foods for those children who have certain allergies. The child's doctor or a dietitian will provide alternatives for the child to eat and drink, and supply a list of foods that the child cannot eat and drink. It is important that the parents and caregivers are educated on what specific allergy the child may have. Make sure to read labels because some products may not have the allergen in the ingredients, but may be processed on equipment that has come into contact with the allergen. Most important is to make the child aware and educated about their allergy so that as they grow up they are able to make their own food choices.

References

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