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for your health: food allergies

learn to understand and successfully manage your food allergy

By Marianne Romano MPA, RD, CDN



PEOPLE OFTEN USE THE TERM “food allergy” loosely, to excuse an aversion to a particular food (as in, please hold the garlic — I’m allergic). But genuine food allergies are quite common, and potentially dangerous. More than 12 million Americans — 3 million of them children — are believed to have food allergies. And according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, those numbers are rising.

ALLERGIC REACTIONS A food allergy is a response by the immune system to a normally harmless protein that your body mistakenly identifies as an invader. In its role of protecting your body, the immune system produces antibodies to fight the “invader.” This reaction can trigger immediate or delayed symptoms including itchy eyes, hives, eczema, mouth tightness, wheezing, and diarrhea. In some cases the allergic reaction is severe and can be life threatening.

Genes play a part in food allergies. If there are food allergies in your family, you have a higher chance of developing an allergy yourself. The most commonly allergenic foods are milk, soy, eggs, wheat, tree nuts, shellfish, and peanuts. But just as a child can outgrow an allergy, an adult can develop one — 2 to 3 percent of adults, for example, will develop an allergy to seafood. If you suspect a food allergy, see a physician with a specialty in allergies.

The most effective way to prevent a reaction is through avoidance, plain and simple.

EATING SAFELY As a registered dietitian, part of my job is to help people learn to live with their food allergies. Some symptoms can be serious, so it’s important to learn how to prevent a reaction. The most effective way is through avoidance, plain and simple.

Avoiding a certain food may seem straightforward, but it can be a challenge when that food is an ingredient in other products, when dining out, and when there are different terms for that food. Here are some tips.

- Check labels every time you make a purchase — food manufacturers may change ingredients without warning.
- Avoid buying at bulk bins or anywhere with loose goods — cross-contamination can be an issue.
- Get answers. If there are terms you don’t understand, call the manufacturer or ask a Hannaford Nutrition Coordinator for advice — visit hannaford.com to find one near you.

Our online resource, hannaford.com, can help you organize your shopping trips and even help you create a customized list of allergen-free products. Having a food allergy may be a hassle — but it doesn’t need to stop you from enjoying delicious, healthy foods.

Marianne Romano is a Nutrition Coordinator at the Hannaford store in Clifton Park, N.Y., and has a private practice in Albany.