

What is the difference between a food allergy and a food intolerance?

An adverse reaction to a food can be the result of either a food allergy or a food intolerance. Many people think these two terms mean the same thing, but they do not.

Food allergy occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks a food protein. Ingestion of the offending food may trigger the sudden release of chemicals, including histamine, resulting in symptoms of an allergic reaction. The symptoms may be mild (rashes, hives, itching, swelling, etc.) or severe (trouble breathing, wheezing, loss of consciousness, etc.). A food allergy can be life-threatening and potentially fatal.

Food intolerance, unlike a food allergy, does not involve the immune system and is not life-threatening. Lactose intolerance, trouble digesting the milk sugar lactose, is a common example. Symptoms may include abdominal cramps, bloating and diarrhea.

What foods cause food allergy?

Although any food could potentially cause a reaction, eight foods are responsible for up to 90% of all food-allergic reactions. They are milk, eggs, peanuts, soy, wheat, tree nuts (such as almonds, pecans, walnuts, etc.), fish, and shellfish.

What are the symptoms of food allergy and anaphylaxis?

Symptoms can include:

- a tingling sensation in the mouth
- swelling of the tongue and throat
- rash
- eczema
- hives and swelling
- vomiting
- abdominal cramps
- diarrhea
- wheezing
- difficulty breathing
- drop in blood pressure
- loss of consciousness

Symptoms typically appear within minutes to two hours after a person has eaten the food to which he or she is allergic.

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that is rapid in onset and may cause death.

How is food allergy diagnosed?

Diagnosing a food allergy takes a team effort between you and your allergist or primary care doctor. To help diagnose food allergy, it is essential for you to describe to your doctor the symptoms you experience and the foods you think may be

causing those symptoms. It may be helpful to write down this information: (1) how the symptoms felt, (2) how soon they came on and how long they lasted after eating, (3) the food or foods eaten prior to the onset of symptoms, (4) the amount of each food eaten, and (5) whether similar reactions have occurred before.

There are two tests most commonly used to begin to determine if an allergy exists — a skin prick test or a blood test, such as a RAST (radioallergosorbent test) or a CAP RAST.

A skin prick test can be done in the doctor's office. The doctor places a drop of the substance being tested on your forearm or back and pricks the skin with a special needle-like instrument, allowing a tiny amount to enter the skin. If you have allergic antibodies to the substance, swelling will form at the site within about 15 minutes.

A blood sample is needed for the RAST or CAP RAST. The sample is sent to a medical laboratory, where tests are done with specific foods to determine whether you have IgE antibodies to those foods. The results are usually received within one week or so.

Both of these tests can only indicate whether IgE is present. Therefore, your doctor must combine the test results with your medical history to make a food allergy diagnosis.