



CONTROLLING FOOD ALLERGENS



Allergic reactions associated with the consumption of specific foods are a growing public health concern. It is estimated that 15 million people in the United States, including four – six percent of children, are affected by food allergies. Symptoms can range from a minor rash, hives, and swelling of the facial area to anaphylaxis, a life-threatening condition. Anaphylaxis can lead to constricted airways and a severe lowering of blood pressure and is estimated to result in 30,000 emergency room visits and 150 deaths in the United States annually.

While scientific advances in the treatment of food allergies continue to be made, no cure has been developed. In order to prevent serious health outcomes, consumers must avoid consumption of foods containing the allergen and seek medical attention for the symptoms as soon as they start to develop.



The Major Food Allergens

There are many types of foods that cause allergic reactions. However, 90 percent of the reactions are caused by eight foods, which are identified in the Food Allergen Consumer Protection Act of 2004 (FALCPA). The eight foods identified as “major food allergens” by FALCPA are:

Milk	Tree Nuts (e.g., walnuts, almonds)
Eggs	Peanuts
Fish (e.g., bass, flounder, cod)	Wheat
Crustacean Shellfish (e.g., crab, lobster)	Soybeans

The law requires all food manufacturers to clearly identify the source names of all major food allergens used as an ingredient in their product. The common names must appear on the label of any packaged food, either:

1. In parentheses following the name in the list of ingredients.
Examples: “flour (wheat), lecithin (soy), whey (milk)”
2. Immediately after or next to the list of ingredients in a “contains” statement.
Example: “Contains Wheat, Soy, and Milk.”

Symptoms

Food allergies are signified by their involvement with the consumer's immune system. When an individual consumes an allergen, their body creates large amounts of a specific antibody called immunoglobulin E (IgE). The elevated levels of IgE in the body cause the symptoms of the allergic reaction. Symptoms may include:

- Hives, flushed skin, or rash
- Tingling or itchy sensation in the mouth
- Face, tongue, or lip swelling
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Coughing or wheezing
- Dizziness and/or lightheadedness
- Swelling of the throat and vocal cords
- Difficulty breathing
- Loss of consciousness

Food intolerance is another common food disorder. Symptoms of food intolerance are usually limited to gastrointestinal reactions. Lactose intolerance is a common condition where the individual does not have the ability to adequately digest lactose, a sugar in milk. While uncomfortable, lactose intolerance is typically not life-threatening and it is not considered a food allergy because it does not involve the immune system.

Best Practices

Consumers who believe they may have a food allergy should consult a qualified medical professional. An accurate diagnosis is a key first step in identifying what foods you should avoid eating. Once you determine which foods cause your allergic reactions there are steps you can take to help protect yourself both at home and when dining out.

At the store – Carefully review the food labels of your groceries. The law requires food manufacturers to clearly identify any of the eight major allergens that are present in their products.

At the restaurant – Ask food handlers if your food contains any food allergens when ordering or when purchasing food. You should ask if they use any products that contain food allergens. There is a potential for cross contamination if food handlers use the same utensils, cutting boards, or gloves for non-allergenic and allergenic foods.



At home – Keep foods that cause your allergic reaction out of your home. Strict avoidance of the source food is the best way to prevent an allergic reaction.

Even if you do not have food allergies, still be mindful of the potential for allergic reactions when preparing meals for guests or events. For example, using the same spatula to mix two batches of brownies, one with walnuts and one without, would lead to the unintentional inclusion of walnuts in both batches. Also, if you use the same pot of water to cook pasta (a common source of wheat) and vegetables, the vegetables could cause an allergic reaction in someone who is sensitive to wheat.