



Severe Food Allergies

Each year, millions of Americans have allergic reactions to food. Although most food allergies cause relatively mild and minor symptoms, some food allergies can cause severe reactions, and may even be life-threatening.

There is no cure for food allergies. Strict avoidance of food allergens — and early recognition and management of allergic reactions to food — are important measures to prevent serious health consequences.

What is Food Allergy?

The job of the body's immune system is to identify and destroy germs (such as bacteria or viruses) that make you sick. A food allergy results when the immune system mistakenly targets a harmless food protein – an allergen – as a threat and attacks it.

Although nearly any food is capable of causing an allergic reaction, only eight foods account for 90 percent of all food-allergic reactions in the United States. These food are:

- Peanut
- Tree nuts
- Milk
- Egg
- Wheat
- Soy
- Fish
- Shellfish

Symptoms

An allergic reaction to food can affect the skin, the gastrointestinal tract, the respiratory tract, and, in the most serious cases, the cardiovascular system. Reactions can range from mild to severe, including the potentially life-threatening condition known as [anaphylaxis](#)

Mild symptoms may include one or more of the following:

- Hives (reddish, swollen, itchy areas on the skin)
- Eczema (a persistent dry, itchy rash)
- Redness of the skin or around the eyes
- Itchy mouth or ear canal
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Stomach pain

- Nasal congestion or a runny nose
- Sneezing
- Slight, dry cough
- Odd taste in mouth

Severe symptoms may include one or more of the following:

- Obstructive swelling of the lips, tongue, and/or throat
- Trouble swallowing
- Shortness of breath or wheezing
- Turning blue
- Drop in blood pressure (feeling faint, confused, weak, passing out)
- Loss of consciousness
- Chest pain
- A weak or “thread” pulse
- Sense of “impending doom”

Prevention

At present, strict avoidance of problem foods is the only way to prevent anaphylaxis.

Stocking Your Kitchen

Learn how to read food labels: [What Should I Look For?](#)

- In the ingredient list, using the allergen’s common name.
- Using the word “Contains” followed by the name of the major food allergen—for example, “Contains milk, wheat.”
- In the ingredient list in parentheses, when the ingredient is a less common form of the allergen—for example, “albumin (egg).”
- Be extra careful with imported products. Food labeling regulations vary by country.
- Ingredients and manufacturing processes can change without warning. Make a habit of carefully reading labels to ensure you avoid any potential allergens

Cooking and Cleaning

- All family members should wash their hands before and after eating to avoid the transfer of food allergens.
- Remember that hand sanitizer does **NOT** remove food proteins that can cause a reaction
- Scrub down counters and tables after you prepare food and after you eat meals. To effectively remove food protein from surfaces, wash the surfaces with soap and water.
- Practice proper food preparation to avoid cross-contact. Thoroughly clean counters, cutting boards, knives, slicers, spoons, measuring cups, mixing bowls and other equipment between foods.
- Beware of airborne allergens during cooking or food preparation. Examples include boiling milk, frying fish or eggs, and using powdered milk or wheat flour. Family members with food allergies may need to keep a safe distance at these times. You

might want to allow the air to clear for 30 minutes afterward before re-entering the room

- Have separate sets of utensils for handling safe and unsafe foods. Some families even use separate dishes (usually designated by different colors).

Adapting Family Rituals

- Create allergen-free zones in your home. Consider restricting eating to the kitchen and dining room only.
- Assemble an emergency kit with your medications, epinephrine auto-injector and Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan. You might want to make two kits—one that stays in the house in a convenient, safe place that everyone knows, and one that travels with you.

Treatment

Someone having a severe allergic reaction could have a combination of symptoms from different body areas. These symptoms can quickly progress to anaphylaxis, a life-threatening condition that requires epinephrine.

Giving Epinephrine

Epinephrine is the only medication that can reverse the symptoms of anaphylaxis. It is available in an easy-to-use auto-injector (Auvi-Q ®, EpiPen®, Generic Epinephrine Auto-Injector [Authorized Generic of EpiPen®] or Adrenallick®).

Your allergist may prefer that epinephrine be used with only mild symptoms, or before symptoms even emerge. Consult with your doctor and refer to your personalized Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan.

- Use epinephrine at the first sign of a severe allergic reaction, or as prescribed.
- Call 911. Tell the dispatchers that you have used epinephrine to treat a suspected anaphylactic reaction to food. Request an ambulance with epinephrine on board.
- Go to the emergency room for further treatment, even if symptoms appear to resolve with the epinephrine. The person may need more medication or treatment to manage the reaction.

Follow the Severe Allergy Action Plan

- This plan outlines recommended treatment in case of an allergic reaction, is signed by a physician and includes emergency contact information.
- Keep your plan in a place where others can find it, and make sure you and others understand what to do in case of an emergency.

[Allergy Action Plan \(English\)](#)

[Allergy Action Plan \(Spanish\)](#)

Information from: <https://www.foodallergy.org/resources/what-food-allergy>