



UNDERSTANDING FOOD ALLERGIES

How to Prevent a Peanut Allergy and More

Have you noticed food allergy warnings at restaurants? Maybe you've heard about peanut-free classrooms and flights. People who have serious reactions to certain foods must be careful about what they eat, and what others eat around them. There's no cure for food allergies. But researchers are learning more about how to prevent and treat this condition.

Allergic reactions happen when your immune system—your body's defense against germs and foreign substances—overreacts to something that's normally harmless. In the United States, most food allergies are caused by peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, wheat, and soy. Allergies show up most often in children. But they can develop at any age.

If you think that you or your child may have a food allergy, see your health care provider. Your doctor will take a detailed medical history and perform a physical examination. If a diagnosis of food allergy seems likely, they may recommend a blood test or skin prick

test. These results will help determine if you or your child has a food allergy.

WHAT THE LATEST RESEARCH IS SAYING

Researchers recently carried out a large clinical trial called Learning Early About Peanut Allergy (LEAP). The study looked at infants' chances of developing an allergy if they ate peanut-containing foods at an early age. Six hundred and forty infants who were at high risk of developing a peanut allergy were enrolled in the trial. The infants were randomly placed in either a peanut-eating or peanut-avoiding group. They continued these diets until they were 5 years old. Infants who ate peanut-containing foods beginning early in life had an 81% lower chance of developing a peanut allergy.

“Based on the strength of these findings, an expert panel sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recently issued updated guidelines to help

health care providers work with families to introduce peanut-containing foods to infants to help prevent the development of peanut allergy,” Sicherer says.

The panel provided 3 guidelines that describe when and how to give these foods. The recommendations are based on how likely a baby is to develop peanut allergy. Talk with your doctor before you introduce any peanut-containing foods to your infant. The doctor may tell you when and how to start feeding peanut to your baby or recommend doing allergy testing first.

The new guidelines may come as a surprise to some people. Almost 20 years ago, experts recommended that babies at high risk for developing peanut allergy avoid peanut-containing foods until age 3. But nearly 10 years ago, experts withdrew this recommendation. There was no proof that it worked.

“The most recent change in guidance was prompted by the very compelling results of the LEAP study,” says Dr. Marshall Plaut, a food allergy expert at NIH. “The new guidelines are based on these results and the clinical knowledge of the expert panel who developed them.”

Food allergy studies have to be done very carefully because reactions can be life threatening. “It’s important to understand how much careful thought goes into ethically designing research studies, particularly those involving vulnerable populations like children,” Plaut says. “Sometimes answers take longer than we would all like. But it’s critical to find them in a way and at a pace that is thoughtful and safe.”

For now, there are no treatments for food allergies. But avoiding allergy-causing foods can help prevent symptoms. Read food labels carefully. Wash your hands and surfaces you touch to prevent accidental contact.

Talk with your health care provider to learn more about preventing and treating food allergies.

FOOD ALLERGY SYMPTOMS

Pay attention to how you feel after you eat and learn how to recognize the symptoms of a food allergy.

Symptoms may include:

- » coughing
- » tingling in the mouth
- » skin reactions like hives or itching
- » nausea and vomiting
- » stomach pain
- » diarrhea

If you have a potentially life-threatening reaction—trouble breathing, dizziness, and fainting—seek immediate medical care by calling 911.

