

# Allergies and food intolerances

**A**llergies are often confused with food intolerances and the side effects of some medicines and other products. Worsening the confusion is the fact that allergies can cause many possible reactions including eczema, hay fever, hives, asthma, swelling of the face, mouth and throat, and/or anaphylactic shock.

## Allergies

One thing all allergic reactions have in common is that they are the result of an overreaction or over sensitivity in the immune system. The body's defence system interacts with the 'allergen', which is the trigger you are exposed to. This causes the cells to release granules of histamine and other inflammatory substances, which cause irritation and swelling of the surrounding tissues.

This reaction is usually quick, but it can be delayed. It may be localised, eg. in the lungs if the person breathes in the allergen, or in the mouth and tongue if they ingest it. Or it can be generalised, causing the blood vessels throughout the body to become leaky and lose fluid. This can cause the blood pressure to drop and the person may go into shock. Sometimes this is seen in severe cases when the substance is injected, for example, by an insect or a drug reaction.

## Intolerances

Symptoms of intolerance to a substance are less specific than in true allergies. They include headaches, skin rash, abdominal pain and bloating, nausea, diarrhoea, lethargy or even hyperactivity.

## Some triggers

Many different substances can be potential allergens. For example:

- grasses
- pollen
- mould
- dust mites
- animal fur
- insects
- cigarette smoke



- some medicines
- various foods such as shellfish, nuts, eggs
- food additives such as MSG, tartrazine (eg. in yellow food colourings such as cornchips and pineapple)
- metabisulphite (orange juice, beer and wine)

## Food intolerances

Reactions to food are occasionally caused by an allergic reaction, but they are usually caused by a dose related intolerance to the food. This is when the person can tolerate small amounts of the food, but larger doses may cause symptoms of intolerance.

You can test this by cutting out the suspected food in your diet for about two weeks and then gradually reintroducing it.

Food intolerances are not necessarily more common in asthmatics, but if an asthmatic is susceptible, the reaction is often worse.

## Cows' milk allergies/intolerances

Cows' milk can cause symptoms of intolerance such as diarrhoea, nausea, and abdominal pain. Some people can be allergic to it, with asthma or eczema being the most common reactions. Babies less than one given straight cows' milk on a regular basis will com-

monly develop iron deficiency anaemia due to bowel irritation, and the passage of small amounts of blood in their poo. This is why modified infant formulas are preferred in this age group. Up to 3% of children will continue to react to cows' milk protein until two years of age. Longer term malabsorption is rare but can occur, as can joint and muscle pain.

Trials of soy milk or goats' milk may be worthwhile so consult with your doctor. Happily this problem usually resolves by the age of six, whereas other food allergies are often lifelong and may be more life threatening.

## Avoid the triggers

Avoiding the trigger is the best option. This may be difficult in certain circumstances, eg. dust mites in a carpeted house or in dust collection sites such as bookshelves, bedding or stuffed toys.

- Regular vacuuming, washing and plastic mattress covers will help.
- Dusting with a damp cloth removes dust without disturbing the dust particles.
- Consider taking up the carpets in your home.
- Avoid humidifiers as they may help distribute mould, pollen and dust around the house.

For people with suspected triggers, your doctor can do skin prick tests to detect these more exactly.

If you already know of any severe allergies, such as reactions to insect stings, then it's wise to be prepared. Talk to your doctor about carrying an adrenaline pen, which could save your life while you go to the hospital.