



# Food Allergies: Know the Basics

**N**early 8% of children and 11% of adults in America have food allergies.

This means more than 30 million people in the U.S. need to exercise caution any time they choose something to eat or drink. The numbers are also rising—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports the prevalence of food allergy in children increased by 50% between 1997 and 2011.

## What is a Food Allergy?

A food allergy is a serious and potentially life-threatening medical condition. A person with a food allergy has an immune system that overreacts to certain foods.

Upon consuming a food with an allergen, a person with a food allergy may experience an itchy mouth, vomiting, diarrhea, hives on their skin, wheezing or other symptoms within a few minutes to an hour.

In the United States, the eight most common food allergens are milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish and shellfish.

## What is a Food Intolerance?

Food intolerance is not the same as a food allergy. Discomfort or unpleasant reactions after eating, when a food intolerance is involved, is typically the result of a problem in digesting certain foods, not an immune system reaction.

Common food intolerances, such as lactose intolerance and gluten intolerance, are related to how the digestive system handles those triggers, not the immune system.

## Living with Food Allergies and Consideration for Others

There is currently no cure for food allergies. People with food allergies must carefully read labels and ingredient lists before choosing what to eat.

Never assume something is safe to eat when you have food allergies. Especially when dining out, confirm with the wait staff that your food is free of allergens and how it is prepared does not have the potential to become cross-contaminated through shared fryers or cutting boards.

Many people with food allergies carry epinephrine, often administered through an Epi-Pen, to inject into themselves if their risk for anaphylaxis is high.

Food allergy reactions can vary unpredictably from mild (a few hives, stomach pain) to severe (swelling of the mouth and throat causing breathing problems, blood pressure dropping, which could lead to loss of consciousness).

Always take food allergies—and the people who live with them—seriously.

SOURCE:

• [foodallergy.org](http://foodallergy.org)