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6/6/08

Could You Have a Food Allergy?

Many adults believe they suffer from food allergies, but what exactly is a food allergy and how do you know if you have one? A food allergy is an adverse reaction to a food or food component that involves the immune system.

About one-third of all adults believe they have a food allergy; however, true food allergies affect less than 2 percent of the total population. Approximately 5 percent of young children are diagnosed with food allergies. Most childhood food allergies appear early in life and are usually outgrown.

Allergies happen when an individual eats a food they are allergic to; the food allergen stimulates the immune system to release antibodies. These antibodies then cause body cells to release substances that cause allergic reactions. Usually the allergens in foods are proteins, not carbohydrates, fats, vitamins or minerals.

Food allergies can happen with almost any food. Yet, a limited number of foods such as milk, eggs, wheat, fish, shellfish, soy, peanuts and tree nuts such as walnuts cause most allergic reactions. Allergic reactions happen usually within minutes to a few hours after eating an offending food. In very sensitive people, even smelling or touching the offending food may produce an allergic reaction. Food allergy reactions vary from person to person.

The same food can produce completely different symptoms in different people as well as varying symptoms within the same person. Food allergy symptoms usually fall into three areas:

- Skin reactions – swelling of lips, mouth, tongue, face or throat; hives, rashes, itching and skin redness.
- Nose, throat and lung reactions – sneezing, nasal congestion, runny nose, chronic cough, shortness of breath or other breathing difficulties.
- Stomach and intestinal reactions – nausea, abdominal pain and bloating, vomiting, diarrhea, cramping and gas.

It's important to have food allergies properly diagnosed. Elimination tests and food challenges for diagnosing suspected food allergies need to be performed only under medical supervision.

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