

General Information About Food Allergies

It's estimated that as many as 1.2 million Canadians may be affected by food allergies and these numbers are increasing, especially among children. The food products most commonly associated with severe allergic reactions in Canada are eggs, milk, peanuts, seafood, sesame, soy, sulphites, tree nuts, and wheat. These are otherwise known as the priority allergens. Food allergies can affect people of all ages. However, they are particularly common in children.

This booklet will help you understand and manage the risks associated with food allergens. It's important that you know what steps you can take to protect yourself, or those around you who may have food allergies. Following a general overview of food allergies, this booklet offers specific information about the nine food products most likely to cause allergic reactions.

Allergic reactions

An allergic reaction occurs when the body's immune system responds aggressively to a particular protein or proteins. Allergic reactions can be caused by protein in substances such as food, insect stings, latex or medication. These proteins are known as allergens. While they pose no threat to the majority of people, allergens can trigger life-threatening reactions in people with severe allergies.

The symptoms of allergic reactions vary in both type and severity. Symptoms can also develop at different rates, sometimes getting worse very quickly. The most severe reaction, called anaphylaxis, can be fatal.

The most common symptoms of an allergic reaction are:

- flushed or pale face, hives, rash, red and itchy skin;
- swelling of the eyes, face, lips, throat and tongue;
- trouble breathing, speaking or swallowing;
- anxiety, distress, sense of doom, weakness, fainting;
- cramps, diarrhea, vomiting; and
- drop in blood pressure, shock, rapid heart beat, loss of consciousness.

Treatment of food allergies

There is no cure for food allergies; the only way to avoid a reaction is to avoid contact with any specific allergens that affect you. An allergic reaction can usually be treated effectively with a prompt injection of epinephrine/adrenaline. However, without treatment, the reaction may become severe and lead to death. If an allergist diagnoses you with a food allergy and prescribes an epinephrine / adrenaline auto-injector, learn how to use it properly and carry it with you at all times. It could save your life.



How to avoid allergic reactions

Avoiding an allergen is the only effective way to prevent allergic reactions, and there are many important steps you can take to help protect yourself.

Some general tips include:

1. Read labels carefully.

Read product labels carefully and avoid products that contain the specific allergens and derivatives of the specific allergens that you are allergic to. Avoid food and products that do not list their ingredients. Manufacturers sometimes change the ingredients used in familiar products, and different varieties and sizes of the same brand may contain different ingredients, so check the label every time you shop.

2. Watch out for cross-contamination.

Cross-contamination occurs when an allergen is unintentionally transferred to a food product that does not normally contain that allergen. Look for precautionary statements like “may contain X” or “not suitable for consumption by persons with an allergy to X”, where “X” is the name by which the allergen is commonly known on pre-packaged foods. These statements indicate that these foods could have been unintentionally exposed to that allergen some time during the manufacturing process and are not safe to eat for those with food allergies. Also avoid bins of bulk food where cross-contamination between bins can occur.

3. Don't take chances.

Don't eat a product if the label states that it “may contain X” or “not suitable for consumption by persons with an allergy to X”, where “X” is the name by which the allergen is commonly known. It is not safe to make choices based on the kind of precautionary statement (“may contain” versus “traces”). Avoid products that have a precautionary statement naming an allergen to which you are allergic. If you don't recognize an ingredient or the ingredients are not listed, don't eat the product. When someone else is preparing food for you, whether at a restaurant or a friend's home, make sure they know about your food allergy, so they can take steps to avoid cross-contamination and alert you to any ingredients of concern.

4. Carry an epinephrine/ adrenaline auto-injector device at all times.

If you need an auto-injector, make sure that you always have it with you in case of an allergic reaction. Allergists recommend that you do not eat if you don't have your auto-injector device with you.

5. Look out for allergens listed by other names.

Food allergens and their derivatives are sometimes found in food under different names. Under each allergen described in this brochure, you will find lists of other names for that allergen, food and products that may contain that allergen, and non-food sources of that allergen. These lists are not complete and are subject to change. Food and food products manufactured in other countries, or purchased outside of Canada (including through mail-order or the Internet), do not always meet Canadian manufacturing and labelling standards.

The Government of Canada's role in food allergen safety

The Government of Canada plays an important role in food allergen safety. Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) work closely with municipal, provincial and territorial partners and industry to safeguard the food supply.

Health Canada is responsible for setting labelling regulations for priority allergens, gluten sources and sulphites in pre-packaged food sold in Canada. Working with the medical community, consumer associations, and the food industry, Health Canada also supports research into the prevalence and impact of food allergies in Canada. The department works continuously with these stakeholder groups to identify improvements to labelling requirements that could help allergic consumers make more informed choices about the foods that they eat. Health Canada also works to develop new allergen detection methods and to validate available commercial methods and is responsible for providing Health Risk Assessments to the CFIA when undeclared allergens are found in food.

While Canada's food safety and labelling laws are established by Health Canada, the CFIA is responsible for enforcing them. The CFIA works with associations, distributors, food manufacturers and importers to promote comprehensive, accurate food labelling and control of food allergens during processing. The CFIA recommends that food companies establish effective controls for allergens and prevent cross-contamination. To this end, the CFIA has developed and distributed appropriate guidelines and tools to industry. Whenever the CFIA detects a potential risk related to a food product—such as an undeclared allergen—action is taken. This can range from follow-up action with the company involved to a recall of the food product from the marketplace and a public warning being issued.

For more information about food allergies:

- Consult an allergist.
- Refer to Health Canada's Food Allergies web page:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/allerg/index-eng.php
- Refer to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's Food Allergens web page:
www.inspection.gc.ca/english/fssa/labeti/allerg/allerge.shtml
- Sign up for the CFIA's "Food Recalls and Allergy Alerts" email or RSS notification service at
www.inspection.gc.ca/recalls
- Order free copies of this brochure by calling 1-800-442-2342/TTY 1-800-465-7735 (8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Eastern time, Monday through Friday).
- Visit these organizations for additional allergy information:
 - Allergy/Asthma Information Association
www.aaia.ca
 - Anaphylaxis Canada
www.anaphylaxis.ca
 - Association québécoise des allergies alimentaires
www.aqaa.qc.ca (French only)
 - Canadian Celiac Association
www.celiac.ca
 - Canadian Food Inspection Agency
www.inspection.gc.ca
 - Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology
www.csaci.ca (English only)
 - Fondation québécoise de la maladie coéliquie
www.fqmc.org (French only)
 - Health Canada
www.hc-sc.gc.ca