

Food Allergies Versus Intolerance - Different Conditions with Different Treatments

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DENVER — Sensitivity or intolerance to foods such as shellfish and milk are common and can cause significant cause for concern, but there is a difference between those symptoms and a true [food allergy](#). Nearly 20 percent of adults report suffering from food allergies, but recent studies show only half that many actually have a food allergy. Some of that difference likely can be attributed to people having an intolerance and mistaking it for a food allergy.



A food allergy is an immune system reaction that affects more than one organ in the body, whereas, food intolerance is usually limited to digestive issues. Food intolerance disorders are a subset of all adverse food reactions and are reported by 15 to 20 percent of the population. Intolerances are even more common among patients with irritable bowel syndrome and other functional gastrointestinal disorders.

Some of the most common symptoms of a food allergy include: hives, itchy and watery eyes, shortness of breath and chest tightness. In the most severe cases, a food allergy can result in anaphylaxis. In contrast, an intolerance to a food affects the digestive system and occurs when a person is unable to break down food. Some symptoms of a food intolerance include: nausea, stomach pain, vomiting and cramps.

“Because of the life-threatening nature of anaphylaxis, it is important to see an allergy specialist if you are unsure if you have a food allergy or an intolerance,” said [Kanao Otsu, MD](#), allergist and immunologist at National Jewish Health. “A specialist will take into account your history with that food and test results to properly diagnose the condition.”

An allergy skin test is used to check immediate sensitivity to select foods. Blood testing will measure the presence of IgE antibodies to specific foods. If it is suspected that you may not be allergic to a particular food, a food challenge may be performed to be certain.

Food allergies and food intolerance have different causes, requiring different treatments. For gastrointestinal sensitivity due to intolerance, carry an oral antihistamine to alleviate discomfort.

For those with food allergies, avoidance is key. If you have a food allergy, Dr. Otsu recommends the following steps to stay safe:

- Always carry your epinephrine auto injector
- Read labels carefully
- Talk with restaurants and hosts about ingredients in dishes being served
- Have a food allergy action plan
- Use and understand allergy medications

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