

Asthma and food

Foods, food additives and chemicals are not common triggers for asthma – they affect less than five per cent of people with asthma. They rarely trigger asthma by themselves, but can trigger asthma either as part of a food allergy reaction or a chemical intolerance.

An allergy is when the body's immune system overreacts to a substance that is normally harmless to most people. These substances are also known as 'allergens'. Being exposed to an allergen may cause irritation or swelling in areas of the body such as the nose, eyes, lungs, air passages and skin.

A severe food allergy reaction is known as anaphylaxis and can be life-threatening.

Symptoms of food allergies

An allergic reaction to food may be mild, moderate or severe. Some of the symptoms may include:

- Generalised skin rash (urticaria)
- Hives
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Itching, burning and swelling around the mouth
- Wheezing as the airways of the lungs narrow.

Anaphylactic shock is potentially fatal

Anaphylactic shock, or anaphylaxis, is an extreme allergic reaction that can be fatal without prompt medical treatment. A life-saving injection of adrenaline is required to prevent permanent injury or death. The onset of symptoms may occur suddenly (within five to 15 minutes) or steadily get worse over time. Some of the symptoms of anaphylactic shock include:

- Itchy palms of the hands and soles of the feet
- Feeling warm and tingly
- A strange taste in the mouth
- Swelling of the face
- Dizziness
- Trouble breathing such as choking
- Unconsciousness.

High risk foods

Some of the foods that may cause an allergic reaction in susceptible people include:

- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Royal jelly (a product made by bees)
- Seafood
- Soy foods
- Wheat.

Food chemicals

Intolerance to food chemicals is dose-related, which means the symptoms get worse as more of the chemical is ingested. Some of the food chemicals that are known to trigger asthma in susceptible people include:

- **Sulphites** – such as sulphur dioxide and sodium metabisulphite. These additives are often used in processed foods as preservatives. Common sources include wine, fruit juices, canned fish and dried fruit.
- **Food colourings** – such as the yellow food dye tartrazine. Food colourings very rarely trigger asthma attacks. Generally, if a person with asthma reacts to one food colouring, they should make sure to avoid eating any food colourings.
- **Monosodium glutamate (MSG)** – this is a naturally occurring chemical frequently used as an additive to enhance flavour, particularly in savoury snack foods. Foods that contain high concentrations of MSG include stock cubes, gravy, soy sauce and packet soups. Hydrolysed vegetable protein is sometimes added to foods in place of MSG, and may trigger asthma in people who are sensitive to MSG. However, whether MSG can, in fact, induce asthma in asthmatic individuals is still the subject of ongoing debate.
- **Salicylates** – naturally occurring salicylates are also present in many foods including instant coffee, soy sauce, tomato paste and sauce, beer and honey. The drug aspirin (acetylsalicylic acid) is a salicylate. Other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) may also trigger dangerous attacks in people who are sensitive to aspirin. Around five to 10 per cent of people with asthma are sensitive to salicylates.

Diagnosis of food allergies

It is important to identify the foods or food chemicals that may cause problems for you. This must be done under strict medical supervision. Don't try and diagnose the trigger foods yourself, because you may restrict your diet unnecessarily and this may be unhealthy. For example, some people with asthma avoid dairy products because they believe (incorrectly) that these foods cause an overproduction of mucus in the airways.

Your doctor may give you blood tests or skin prick tests. Further investigations could include 'challenge tests', where you deliberately eat particular foods while undergoing a lung function test.

Read the labels on food products

Some food additive numbers to remember include:

- **Sulphites** –220–228
- **Tartrazine** –102
- **Other food colourings** –107, 110, 122–129, 132, 133, 142, 151, 155
- **Monosodium glutamate** –620–625.

There is no special 'asthma' diet

Only a small percentage of people with asthma have food allergies or intolerances that trigger asthma attacks. It is important to remember that no foods either cause or prevent asthma. Like anyone else, people with asthma should eat a healthy, balanced diet that includes plenty of fresh and unprocessed foods. If you are concerned about your diet, consult with your doctor or dietician.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Allergy specialist
- The *Official Shopper's Guide to Food Additives and Labels*. This is available through major bookshops, supermarkets and newsagencies
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ). There is a list of food additives and their numbers on the FSANZ website.
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria Tel. (03) 9326 7088 or 1800 645 130
- Anaphylaxis Australia Tel. 1300 728 000

Things to remember

- Some people with asthma have food allergies that can trigger asthma attacks.
- Some of the foods that may cause an allergic reaction in susceptible people include peanuts, seafood and wheat.
- Certain food chemicals, such as some food colourings, are known triggers of asthma attacks in susceptible people.
- Always consult with your doctor or dietitian if you suspect that certain foods or food additives may be triggering asthma attacks.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Asthma Foundation of Victoria

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