

Is it Really Food Allergies?

Most people confuse food allergies with sensitivities. So, what's the difference?

Plenty of people have a physical reaction to certain foods, but is it really an allergy? Actual allergies are pretty rare (about 4% of adults). But the symptoms sometimes look a lot like food allergies, so it's easy to get them confused.

Diarrhea? Gas? Nausea? You're probably just intolerant.

"The main difference between a food allergy and a food intolerance is that a food intolerance doesn't involve the immune system," says Sheah Rarback, registered dietitian nutritionist at the University of Miami Health System. "The definition of an allergy is that it triggers your body's threat-response and the release of antibodies by your body's immune system."

Rather than being triggered by the immune system, an intolerance is usually related to the digestive system's inability to break down certain foods. Most symptoms of intolerance are associated with the gut. And, food sensitivities can be caused by adverse reactions to chemical components or additives and can cause a range of symptoms.



An intolerance or food sensitivity is usually significantly less

serious than an actual allergy.

Their symptoms can be treatable with dietary changes or medications.

Some common examples:

- **Lactose Intolerance:** An inability to digest lactose, the primary carbohydrate in dairy, due to lack of an enzyme. Symptoms are diarrhea, abdominal pain and bloating.
- **Gluten Intolerance:** An inability to digest gluten, a protein in wheat. Eating wheat causes reflux, nausea, headaches, fatigue, and depression.
- **Histamine sensitivity/intolerance:** An inability to digest food-based histamines that trigger a bodily response that is similar to an allergic reaction.
- **A sensitivity to sulfites** or other additives in foods that can trigger a bodily response similar to an allergic reaction.

Something more severe? Could be an allergy.

As many as 15 million people suffer from food allergies, triggered by almost 200 different types of foods. Each person's physical response can be dramatically different. In general, Sheah warns that "the body's immune response to foods can have symptoms that are much more severe than what you would experience with a food intolerance or sensitivity."

When it comes to allergies, it doesn't take very long for the body to react. The symptoms of an allergic reaction to food can encompass a response from your entire body - not only your gut. They can range from mild to severe. A person with an allergy may eat an offending food and have a mild reaction. But, the next time they eat the same food the reaction can be severe.

Your body's response to an allergy could include:

▪ Skin Reactions

- Itching
- Rashes
- Swelling
- Hives

▪ Respiratory Reactions

- Trouble Breathing
- Wheezing
- Coughing
- Runny nose

“The most dangerous response to an allergen is anaphylactic shock,” describes Sheah. “You will never see a food sensitivity trigger anaphylaxis. That’s when your allergy becomes life threatening. It can cause your throat to swell, your blood pressure to drop, it can even cause heart failure.”

If you’re concerned that you might be sensitive to certain foods, you should carefully track your symptoms in response to what you eat then talk to your doctor about the symptoms that you’re experiencing. It’s important to understand if you’re dealing with an intolerance or allergy so that you can know how to manage your diet, treat your response, and adjust your lifestyle accordingly. Put on a restricted diet for allergies? Consult with a registered dietitian nutritionist to ensure the nutritional adequacy of what you are eating.