

# Healthy Living Newsletter

A MedWatch publication to keep you healthy and informed.



## Staying Healthy in Winter



## What You Need to Know About Food Allergies

**More than 50 million Americans have an allergy of some kind. Food allergies affect an estimated 8% of children under age five and up to 4% of all adults.** Food allergy symptoms are most common in babies and children, but they can appear at any age.

While there's no cure, some children outgrow their food allergies as they get older, and some adults can even develop an allergy to foods that they have eaten for years with no problems. Living with food allergies can have negative effects on the quality of life of patients and their families because they need to remain vigilant about accidental exposures.

Food allergy is an immune system reaction that occurs soon after eating a certain food. Even a tiny amount of the allergy-causing food can trigger signs and symptoms such as digestive problems, hives, or swollen airways. In some people, a food allergy can cause severe symptoms or even a life-threatening reaction known as **anaphylaxis**.

It's easy to confuse a food allergy with a much more common reaction known as **food intolerance**. While bothersome, food intolerance is a less serious condition that does not involve the immune system.

### Food Allergy Symptoms

For some people, an allergic reaction to a particular food may be uncomfortable but not severe. For other people, an allergic food reaction can be frightening and even life-threatening. Food allergy symptoms usually develop within a few minutes to two hours after eating the offending food. In rare cases, symptoms may be delayed for several hours.

#### The most common food allergy signs and symptoms include:

- Tingling or itching in the mouth.
- Hives, itching or eczema.
- Swelling of the lips, face, tongue, throat or other parts of the body.
- Wheezing, nasal congestion or trouble breathing.
- Abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea or vomiting.
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or fainting.

### Anaphylaxis

In some people, a food allergy can trigger a severe allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. This can cause life-threatening signs and symptoms, including:

- Constriction and tightening of the airway.
- A swollen throat or the sensation of a lump in your throat that makes it difficult to breathe.
- Shock with a severe drop in blood pressure.
- Rapid pulse.
- Dizziness, lightheadedness or loss of consciousness.

Emergency treatment is critical for anaphylaxis. Untreated, anaphylaxis can cause a coma or even death.

### When to See a Doctor

See your healthcare provider or allergist if you have food allergy symptoms shortly after eating. If possible, see your provider when the allergic reaction is occurring. This will help your provider make a diagnosis. Seek emergency treatment if you develop any signs or symptoms of anaphylaxis.

Source: Mayo Clinic



## Food Allergy Myths and Facts

Whether you live with food allergies or care for someone who does, brushing up on the facts is a great place to start. You can show your support for the food allergy community by helping to dispel these popular myths and misconceptions.

**Myth: Eating a little bit won't hurt.**  
**Fact:** For someone with a food allergy, even a trace of a food allergen can trigger a severe reaction. You must remove the allergen completely from your diet to stay safe and live well.

**Myth: Each allergic reaction will get worse.**  
**Fact:** Food allergy reactions are unpredictable. The way your body reacts to a food allergen one time cannot predict how it will react the next time.

**Myth: A food allergy that has caused only mild reactions is a mild food allergy.**  
**Fact:** There are no mild or severe food allergies—only mild to severe reactions. What caused a mild reaction in the past may lead to a severe reaction in the future and vice versa. Never let your guard down.

**Myth: Food allergies are the same as food intolerances.**  
**Fact:** Food allergies involve your immune system, which produces antibodies that fight the “enemy” food by releasing histamines and other chemicals, triggering the symptoms of an allergic reaction. Food intolerance does not involve the immune system, and while it can cause great discomfort, it is not life-threatening.

**Myth: Peanut is the most common food allergy in children.**  
**Fact:** Milk is actually the most common food allergy in the U.S. for babies and young children.

**Myth: Peanut is the most “dangerous” food allergy.**  
**Fact:** No single food allergy poses a greater threat than another. While nine foods (milk, egg, peanut, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, shellfish, and sesame) account for most food allergies, virtually any food can cause an allergic reaction.

**Myth: A food allergy always develops in childhood. Then you're stuck with it for life.**  
**Fact:** You can develop a food allergy at any age, even to food that you've safely eaten before. Children may outgrow a food allergy over time. This is common with allergies to milk, egg, soy, and wheat. Allergies that are harder to outgrow include peanuts, tree nuts, fish and shellfish.

Source: Foodallergy.org

## The Importance of Having a Food Allergy Action Plan

A food allergy action plan is an important tool, especially in settings such as schools, childcare facilities, or any place where a person may be at risk of exposure to severe allergens. The plan outlines specific steps to be taken in case of an allergic reaction. Here are some key reasons why a food allergy action plan is important:

- 1. Emergency Preparedness:** Food allergies can lead to severe and potentially life-threatening reactions, such as anaphylaxis. Having an action plan ensures that everyone involved has clear instructions on what actions to take, including the use of emergency medication, such as epinephrine auto-injectors (e.g., EpiPen, Auvi-Q, etc).
- 2. Standardized Communication:** An action plan serves as a communication tool between the individual with the food allergy, their caregivers, teachers, school staff, and other relevant personnel. It provides vital information about the specific allergens, symptoms, and appropriate steps to be taken during an allergic reaction.
- 3. Early Recognition and Intervention:** The action plan includes a list of potential allergic symptoms. By promptly identifying the symptoms, appropriate actions can be taken, potentially preventing the reaction from escalating.
- 4. Education:** An action plan helps raise awareness and understanding among those involved. Education about food allergies is crucial for creating a safe environment and fostering empathy and support for individuals with allergies.
- 5. Consistent Care:** By having a documented action plan, the individual with the food allergy can receive consistent care across different settings. The plan provides a reference for caregivers and ensures that appropriate precautions and interventions are followed.

### Ready to Start Living Healthy?

For more tips on staying healthy this winter, consult your physician or call the number on your member ID card.



### NUTRITION CORNER

## Creating an Allergy-Safe Kitchen

Before we immerse ourselves in the joy of cooking, **it's important to understand how to create a safe environment for preparing meals, particularly for individuals with food allergies.** The heart of this lies in creating an allergy-safe kitchen, which is a kitchen set up to minimize the risk of exposure to allergens.

Cross-contamination is a significant concern when preparing meals for those with food allergies. Cross-contamination is the inadvertent transfer of allergens from one surface or food item to another. It can occur during food storage, preparation, or cooking. Even tiny amounts of an allergen transferred through cross-contamination can be enough to trigger an allergic reaction. Here's how to reduce the risk:

**Designate Separate Cooking Utensils:** Just as we have distinct tools for handling raw meat and vegetables to prevent bacterial cross-contamination, we should also have dedicated utensils for allergen-free cooking. These might include pots, pans, cutting boards, knives, spoons, and spatulas, among others. It's best to have these utensils in a different color or clearly labeled to avoid any mix-ups.

**Thorough Cleaning:** Always clean cooking surfaces, utensils, and hands thoroughly before starting any meal preparation, especially when dealing with allergen-free cooking. Warm, soapy water works well in most cases. If allergens were previously on the surfaces, it's essential to clean them properly, as allergens are not necessarily neutralized by freezing or heating.

**Allergen-Free Food Storage:** When storing food, keep allergen-free food separate from food containing allergens. This could mean designating certain shelves in the pantry or refrigerator for allergen-free food or using sealed containers to protect food from cross-contamination.

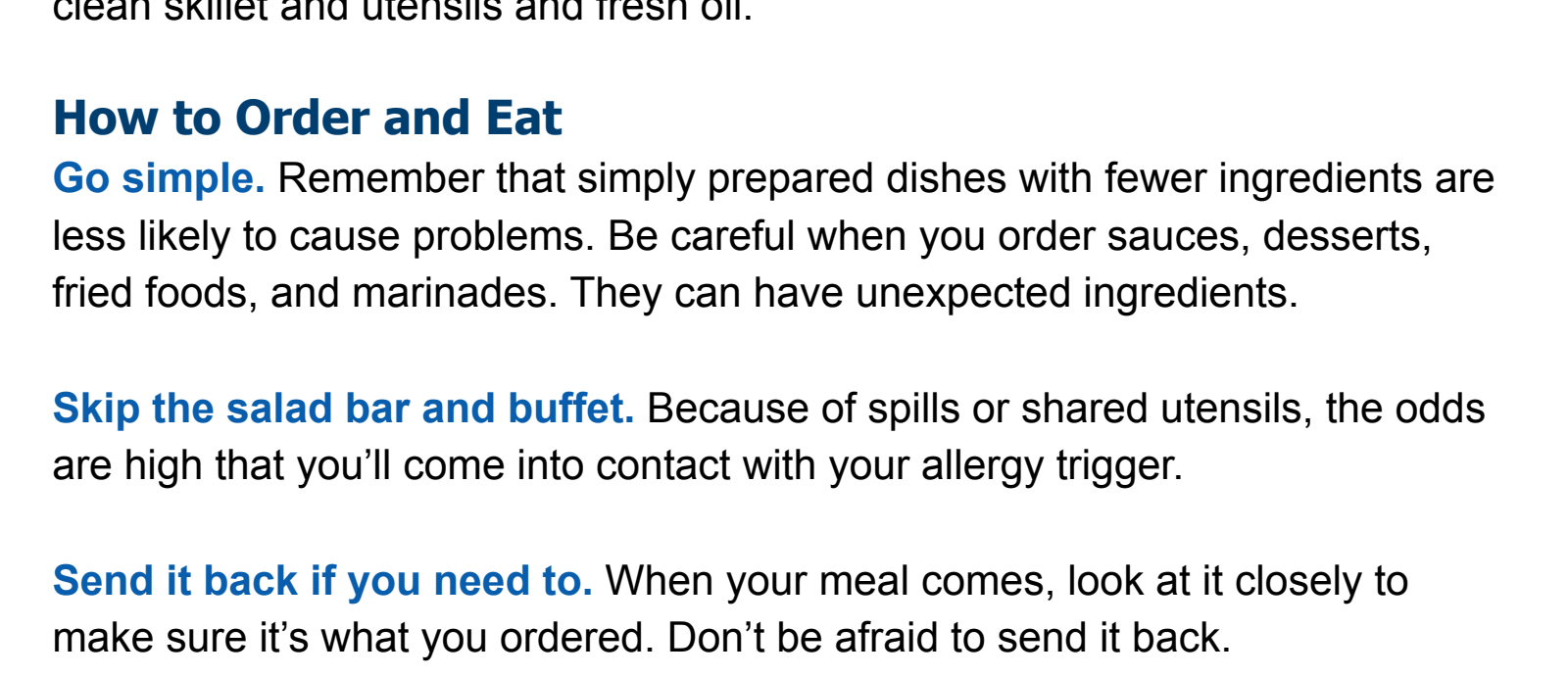
**Use Separate Appliances:** In some cases, it may be necessary to have separate appliances, such as toasters or deep fryers, for allergen-free cooking. Crumbs or residues in these appliances can contaminate allergen-free food.

**Check Food Labels:** Always check food labels for allergen information. Even products that seem safe might be processed in a facility that also processes common allergens.

**Creating Awareness:** Everyone involved in food preparation in the home should understand the risks and be taught to prevent cross-contamination. This includes understanding which foods are safe and unsafe, knowing how to read food labels, and learning how to respond in the event of an allergic reaction.

With careful planning and practices, an allergy-safe kitchen can become a reality, turning meal preparation from a time of stress to a time of enjoyment and creativity.

Source: Allergicliving.com



## Avoiding Food Allergies In Restaurants

If you have a food allergy, the prospect of going to a restaurant may seem risky. **Does the restaurant have a food allergy plan and appropriate food preparation procedures?** Do the servers appreciate how dangerous food allergies are? Is the kitchen staff trained in minimizing cross-contamination? While you can never be sure, a little advanced planning can help keep you safe the next time you go to a restaurant. Follow these tips to help make sure you're served a trouble-free meal.

### Prepare for the Experience

**Research.** Call ahead to the restaurant and see if the kitchen can handle your needs. Check out the menu online. The SafeFARE website can help you find restaurants that are “allergy-aware,” which means the staff has training in food allergies.

**Choose cuisine carefully.** Certain allergic reactions are more likely with certain types of food. Thai and Chinese restaurants, for example, often use peanut oil to fry. Anything you order in a seafood restaurant has a higher risk of being contaminated with fish or shellfish.

**Eat during off-hours.** Try not to go to a restaurant when it's crowded. It's harder to talk to the manager or chef during busy times. The kitchen staff is more likely to make a mistake when things are hectic.

#### Talk to the Staff

**Don't be embarrassed.** There's nothing awkward or rude about explaining your allergy or making special requests. Most restaurants deal with food allergies all the time.

**Be up-front.** The first time the waiter comes to your table, explain that you have a condition. Make clear that even a tiny amount of the food could make you sick. If you need to, speak to the manager or chef directly.

**Have info to give out.** Some people carry cards to hand out that have a brief explanation of their food allergy for the kitchen staff.

**Ask about cross contamination.** Make sure your food won't come into contact with whatever you're allergic to in the kitchen. Ask that the chef use a clean skillet and utensils and fresh oil.

#### How to Order and Eat

**Go simple.** Remember that simply prepared dishes with fewer ingredients are less likely to cause problems. Be careful when you order sauces, desserts, fried foods, and marinades. They can have unexpected ingredients.

**Skip the salad bar and buffet.** Because of spills or shared utensils, the odds are high that you'll come into contact with your allergy trigger.

**Send it back if you need to.** When your meal comes, look at it closely to make sure it's what you ordered. Don't be afraid to send it back.

**Pack your own food.** If you have to go to a restaurant that can't work with you, bring your own allergy-safe food. Once you have explained that you have a serious medical condition and don't have a choice, most restaurants will accommodate this request.

It means a lot to have a safe restaurant that you can rely on. So, if you have a good experience at one, thank the staff and leave a nice tip. They might remember you – and help you avoid food allergy triggers in the future.

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