

Peanut allergy

What is a food allergy?

Allergies are oversensitive reactions by the body's immune system to certain foods, due to the release of a chemical called *histamine*.

A food allergy, which usually starts in infancy and childhood, is commonly caused by milk and other dairy products, eggs and peanuts. Other foods include oranges, soya beans, nuts, chocolate, fish and wheat.

What about peanut allergy?

Peanut allergy, which is becoming more common especially in children, can be a very serious life-threatening problem. It is a reaction to peanut protein and is seen in about 1 in 50 children. The signs usually appear in the first 3 years of life. It is a particular problem if it occurs in children with asthma or eczema.

A special feature of peanut allergy is that it usually gets worse with time, while most food allergies improve.

What are the symptoms?

Reactions to peanuts usually begin within minutes of contact.

The first symptoms are:

- itching, especially around the mouth
- burning, especially around the mouth.

Others that follow may include:

- flushing, especially of the face
- skin rash
- wheezing
- swelling of the tongue and lips
- difficulty breathing
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- collapse
- loss of consciousness.

How is it diagnosed?

It is diagnosed initially upon suspicion of an abnormal reaction to food containing peanuts. A food challenge test and skin prick test, and/or RAST test under medical supervision, help confirm the diagnosis.

What are ways of being exposed to peanuts?

Exposure can come from:

- eating peanuts directly
- eating peanut products, for example:
 - peanut sauce
 - peanut butter
 - certain muesli bars
 - certain chocolates
- close contact with a person who eats the products listed above
- mother's diet via breast milk
- peanut-based oils massaged into the skin.

Ingested peanuts cause the most severe reactions but the allergy can be triggered by skin or eye contact with the food, or even inhalation of food particles containing peanut.

What are the effects of becoming sensitised?

Once sensitised, a child can get a serious allergic reaction to even a minute amount of peanut. There is evidence that as little as one two-thousandth of a peanut can do this.

What are the risks?

There is a risk of *anaphylaxis*, which is a potentially fatal collapse or 'shock'. The affected child will suddenly swell around the face, go pale or blue and go floppy. Urgent medical attention is needed so that life-saving adrenaline can be injected. An ambulance or your doctor should be called.

The combination of asthma and peanut allergy is quite dangerous.

Do peanuts cross-react with other nuts?

Children with peanut allergy can become allergic to other nuts such as walnuts, hazelnuts, cashews, almonds, pistachios and macadamia nuts.

What is the management?

It is vital to avoid eating or coming into contact with peanut-containing foods. It is also important to read all food labels on every food you buy or eat to determine if the food contains any traces of peanut. When eating away from home ask about the probability of peanut occurring in food ingredients and preparation methods. This applies particularly to food outlets or restaurants preparing Asian food. Be wary of satay sauce.

Those at special risk should have an emergency anaphylaxis kit with the Adrenaline EpiPen on standby at home or when away from home.

It is advisable for women who have a history of allergic (atopic) disorders to avoid eating peanut products during pregnancy and when breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding for the first 6 months is believed to help prevent peanut allergy.

