

## Think you might have food allergies? Read these tips

By Aaron Warnick

**F**ood is one of the great pleasures in life. But for some people, it can also be one of the greatest risks.

The human immune system, when working the right way, is an amazing defense that can protect you from infection. Your body is constantly scanning for germs. When it finds something it doesn't like, it tries to get rid of it. But sometimes your body will mistake food for something that could hurt you. This is a food allergy.

"It's a harmful reaction in your body," says Andrew Kim, MD, medical director of the Allergy and Asthma Centers in Virginia. "Sometimes it will cause something mild, like itchiness or hives, or sometimes you won't be able to breathe."

According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, about 5% of U.S. children and 4% of adults have a food allergy.

The U.S. Food Allergen Labeling and

Consumer Protection Act identifies eight major food allergens: eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, shellfish, soybeans, tree nuts and wheat. In 2004, those allergens accounted for about 90% of all food allergies and serious allergic reactions in the U.S.

If you are having an allergic reaction to food, you may have a tingly or itchy feeling in your mouth.

It can also show up on your skin as hives, itching or eczema. Other symptoms include diarrhea, nausea or vomiting as well as dizziness, fainting or lightheadedness. If you have swelling of the lips, face, tongue and throat or

wheezing and trouble breathing, call for help immediately.

Even if your reaction is mild, you should talk to your doctor. They can help you determine whether you have an allergy and tell you which foods to avoid.

Food allergies are more common in kids and usually first appear in childhood. But they can also develop in adulthood.

If a food allergy is suspected, your allergist, doctor or pediatrician may carry out a test known as a food challenge. During the test, patients are fed small amounts of food and carefully watched for reactions. Such testing should always be done in a doctor's office by trained staff.

"Allergic reactions happen fast," Kim says. "If you're looking out for allergic reactions in either you or a child, you'll probably see results within an hour or so."

Some parents used to think that keeping allergens away from their healthy, non-allergic kids would help prevent reactions. But in fact, the opposite is true. Recent studies have found that years of avoiding certain foods may have made allergies more common.

"It's now thought you should introduce allergenics early, unless there are those risk factors that



>> For more information on food allergies, visit [www.foodallergy.org](http://www.foodallergy.org).

make allergies more likely," Kim says.

Sometimes when people suspect they have a food allergy, they start avoiding certain foods. But before cutting whole classes of foods out of your diet on your own, you should talk to your doctor. You don't want to miss out on nutrients your body needs to function.

Often, what people think are food allergies are really food intolerances, which means your body has trouble digesting a certain food. While food allergies can be deadly, food intolerances are not.

Food allergies can't be prevented with medication, but in some cases, food intolerances can. Dealing with a food intolerance may be as easy as eating less of a certain food, versus removing it from your diet altogether.

"Sometimes bad body reactions and common intolerances get confused with allergies," Kim says. "You end up with people avoiding foods — and important nutrients — that they don't need to avoid," Kim says.

If you or your child is diagnosed with a food allergy, talk to your doctor about a prescription for epinephrine. It can be used during a reaction known as anaphylaxis, which may otherwise be deadly.

### If your child has a food allergy

◆ Check food ingredient labels carefully. Even if you've used a product before, check it each time you use it, as ingredients may change.

◆ Make sure your child knows what they are allergic to and that they should not accept food from others. Talk to school officials about your child's allergy.

◆ If you dine out at a restaurant, call ahead and let them know about your child's allergy. Look for allergen info on menus, and discuss ingredients with your server.

◆ Many familiar recipes can be adapted to avoid allergens. Cook favorite meals with your child so they can see how easy it is to prepare them safely.

