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Peanut & tree nut allergy

ASCIA Education Resources patient information

Peanut allergy is most common in infants, but may appear for the first time in adults. It causes more problems than other food allergies because it is common (1 in 50 infants), exposure is hard to avoid and even trace amounts can trigger symptoms. Less than 20 % of cases resolve, although severity may occasionally lessen with age.

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Allergic reactions to peanut can be serious

The majority of allergic reactions to peanut are mild. Contact hives, worse eczema and vomiting are the most common complaints. Some sensitive individuals develop difficulty breathing due to asthma or throat swelling, or a drop in blood pressure. This is known as *anaphylaxis*, and allergy to peanuts is one of the most common triggers.

Other allergies may also be present

Food allergy is more common in people who have other allergies like hayfever, asthma or eczema. As many children have allergies to other foods such as milk, egg or other nuts, your doctor may test for these allergies as well.

Reliable diagnosis of peanut allergy is important

Your doctor will normally ask a series of questions that may help to narrow down the list of likely causes of allergy such as foods or medicines consumed that day, or exposure to stinging insects. This approach will also help to exclude conditions that can sometimes be confused with food allergy. Skin or blood (RAST) allergy testing helps confirm or exclude potential triggers.

Unorthodox so-called "allergy tests" are unproven

There are several methods of unorthodox "tests" for food allergy. Examples include cytotoxic food testing, Vega testing, kinesiology, iridology, pulse testing, Alcat testing and Rinkel's intradermal skin testing. These are unreliable, have no scientific basis and have no useful role in the assessment of allergy.

Peanuts are hard to avoid

Peanuts are widely used in processed Western and in Oriental cooking. This poses significant problems for people with severe peanut allergy. Laws require that any product, which might feasibly contain peanut traces, *must* be labeled to that effect, so the labels of all foods should be checked before purchase. Some manufacturers will also label their products as *possibly* containing traces of nuts. In such situations, multiple products may be made on the same production line and cross-contamination with *traces* of nuts cannot be guaranteed. The risk of cross contamination is greatest for those with severe food allergies. Occasionally nut products or oils have been used as unlabelled ingredients in cosmetics such as massage oils. For example, the term *Arachnis oil* on the label is the scientific name for peanut. The following list provides some examples of foods that *can* contain peanut. While peanut may not *always* be present, foods in this list should be examined carefully to ensure that no traces of peanuts are present.

Foods that may contain peanuts:

- Peanut butter or paste, peanut oil, mixed nuts,
- Baked goods – biscuits, crackers, pastries
- Cereals, Muesli
- Chinese, Indonesian, Thai and vegetarian dishes
- Italian food - spaghetti sauces, pesto
- Egg rolls, kebabs
- Ice creams, chocolates, sweets, Nougat, Marzipan, 'health' bars
- 'Natural' flavourings, nutmeg
- Soups, Bouillon, Worcestershire sauce
- Vegetable fats & oils, Arachnis oil
- Hydrolyzed vegetable protein
- Animal and bird feeds
- Lotions, shampoos & creams
- Prometrium (progesterone cream derived from peanuts)

Other foods may also cause allergic reactions

Despite the name, "peanut", they are actually legumes, coming from the same family as soy, lentils and peas. Fortunately, the majority of peanut allergic people can eat these other foods with safety.

Other nuts and seeds can cause severe allergy

Even though there is little similarity between peanut allergens and those present in tree nuts (like walnut, almond, pecan, pistachio or cashew), there is an increased risk of other food allergies in peanut allergic children. For this reason, (and because of the risk of peanut contamination in "mixed nuts"), *it is usually recommended that peanut allergic people avoid all nuts*. Some people, on the other hand, are allergic to tree nuts alone or to sunflowers, sesame or poppy seeds. The management of these patients is similar to that of peanut allergic patients.

Highly purified peanut oil contains little allergen

Refined peanut oils (not cold-pressed) have been shown to be safe in small studies. Unfortunately, it is difficult to guarantee that the oil is sufficiently refined to remove all traces of allergen. This particularly applies to restaurants which use peanut oils for cooking, as peanut proteins may leach into the oil during cooking, and the oil may be re-used a number of times. In general therefore, avoidance of peanut oil is frequently advised.

Avoidance is the only proven treatment for peanut allergy

The only proven treatment for peanut allergy is avoidance. It is therefore fortunate that omitting peanuts from the diet has no adverse nutritional consequences. Children should bring their own nut free food with them to school. They should also be encouraged not to swap food. In common eating and food preparation areas, where there are children with severe peanut allergy, particularly in day care centres and pre-schools, all nut-containing foods should be avoided.

Research into desensitisation for peanut allergy is ongoing but this is not yet available for routine management.

Action Plans are essential

The average nut-allergic person will have an accidental exposure every couple of years. The difficulties of avoiding peanuts completely make it essential to make back-up Action Plans. These are discussed in further details in the article *Management of Food Allergy*.

Nut allergy can be effectively managed

The good news is that in concert with a trained allergist and a network of supportive contacts, people with allergy to peanuts can learn to live with their condition. The knowledge that Epipen (an automatic device for administering adrenalin) is available and is life-saving offers reassurance. Research continues to find new ways of more effectively treating this condition. Anaphylaxis Australia (www.allergyfacts.org.au) offers valuable updates and tips for dealing positively with food allergies.

References

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