

FACTSHEET No. 19

FOOD ALLERGIES

What is a food allergy?

Food allergy is an unusual sensitivity to a particular food or food ingredient. For most people the reaction will be mild but in some cases it can cause a life-threatening condition called anaphylaxis. This affects the whole body, often within seconds of eating even a minute portion of the food in question.

The foods most likely to cause anaphylactic reaction are:

- Peanuts (ground nuts)
- Tree nuts, including almond, Brazil, cashew, hazelnut, pecan, pistachio and walnut
- Shellfish/molluscs/crustacea
- Sesame seeds.

Other foods that can cause allergic reactions in some people include eggs, dairy products and soya.

Most people should know the foods to which they are allergic. If you think you may suffer from a food allergy you should consult your doctor.

Food Intolerance

There are an increasing number of stories in the press or on TV about foods causing unpleasant reactions. In fact, the terms food allergy and intolerance are much misused and apparently misunderstood by the media and the general public. In particular, wheat seems to be the target of unfounded, non-scientifically based claims about it causing intolerance or sensitivity.

This can create a lot of confusion and may lead people to think, wrongly, that they are 'allergic' to certain foods including wheat. This can lead people to cut out foods which in fact may be an essential part of a healthy balanced diet. This is not to deny that some people experience unpleasant symptoms after eating certain foods, but if you do you should consult your G.P rather than self-diagnose.

A report *Fact or Fiction? Adverse reactions to wheat* has been produced by the Flour Advisory Bureau that summarises current scientific opinion and research on both food allergy and food intolerance. Copies are available from their website at www.fabflour.co.uk or see their contact details at the end of this factsheet.

Bakery products

Some bakery products contain nuts or sesame seeds as an ingredient. These will always be included, by name, in the list of ingredients. Bakeries take all possible steps to avoid inadvertent cross-

contamination of products with allergenic ingredients. If there is a risk that a product may contain traces of nuts or seeds, the product wrapper should have a warning note *'may contain nuts or seeds'*.

People who suffer from a food allergy should always check the list of ingredients on the product wrapper carefully.

Food manufacturers keep lists of the foods which contain ingredients likely to cause an allergic reaction and should be able to provide the necessary information for consumers on request. The food wrapper will include a contact address or telephone number for the manufacturer or retailer.

Some people may be intolerant to the gluten protein in wheat flour. This is called coeliac disease. Further information on gluten is available on the Federation of Bakers' website at www.bakersfederation.org.uk/gluten.htm

Food safety and hygiene/good manufacturing practice

In plant bakeries, all workers involved in handling ingredients, equipment, utensils, packaging and products are trained in the hazards associated with food allergy. All possible action is taken to ensure there is no inadvertent cross-contamination of products with potentially allergenic ingredients. Controls will include separate storage of ingredients, good handling and hygiene procedures, washing and cleaning down of production plants and the implementation of Good Manufacturing Practice.

With these controls in place it is unlikely that wrapped bread and other wrapped bakery products will contain any unlisted allergenic material.

Useful addresses

The Anaphylaxis Campaign
P.O. Box 275
FARNBOROUGH
Hants. GU14 6SX
Tel: 01252 542029
Website: www.anaphylaxis.org.uk

The National Asthma Campaign
Providence House
Providence Place
LONDON N1 0NT
Tel: 020 7226 2260
Helpline: 08457 010203
Website: www.asthma.org.uk

The British Allergy Foundation
Deepdene House
30 Bellgrove Road
WELLING Kent DA16 3PY
Tel: 020 8303 8525
Website: www.allergyfoundation.com

The British Dietetic Association
5th Floor, Charles House
148/9 Great Charles Street
Queensway
BIRMINGHAM B3 3HT
Tel: 0121 200 8080
Website: www.bda.uk.com

The British Nutrition Foundation
High Holborn House
52-54 High Holborn
LONDON WC1V 6RQ
Tel: 020 7404 6504
Website: www.nutrition.org.uk

The Food and Drink Federation
6 Catherine Street
LONDON WC2B 5JJ
Tel: 020 7836 2460
Website: www.fdf.org.uk

The Coeliac Society
P. O. Box 220, HIGH WYCOMBE

The Flour Advisory Bureau
21 Arlington Street

Bucks. HP11 2HY
Tel: 01494 437278
Website: www.coeliac.co.uk

LONDON SW1A 1RN
Tel: 020 7493 2521
Website: www.fabflour.co.uk