

## Food allergies

A food allergy. Anyone who's anyone has got one! All the "celebs" have them, and some claim that they are the secret to their waif like figures. Others say that avoiding whole groups of food have given them the secret of eternal youth!

But how much truth is there behind the idea that food allergies are the answer to all our health and beauty problems?

Millions of people mistakenly believe they are allergic to one food or another. In fact, less than 2% of the population have a true food allergy. Muriel Simmon, Chief executive of the British Allergy Foundation agrees and explains that "food allergy and food intolerance are often confused". Research shows us that 1 in 3 people believe they have a food allergy. Silvia Anton, Healthcare analyst from Datamonitor says "As society becomes more health conscious, more and more people are self diagnosing that they or their children have a food allergy, and are eliminating important foods from the diets."

Many people are avoiding foods for no medical or scientific reason, and more worrying is that they may well be putting themselves at real risk of nutrient deficiencies. They often receive no advice about how to exclude a food properly and safely.

Food allergy is not just the latest fad for adults; children's allergies are blamed for behavioural problems as well as many of the normal childhood illnesses. It is true that the percentage of children who have a true food allergy is slightly higher than that of adults, but again nowhere near as high as you might think. Children often "grow out" of their food allergies. Again, it's a scary prospect to think of parents unnecessarily removing nutritious foods from their children's diets when they need them the most.

There are two major problems facing someone who thinks they have food allergy, firstly, the plethora of so called "allergy tests" that are available, and then how to completely avoid a food like wheat or milk- in a true allergy or intolerance it can only take a tiny amount of the problem food to cause a reaction.

Most commercial or over the counter allergy tests are highly inaccurate. Often they are extremely expensive. An allergic reaction is an immune response, in its most extreme form it can lead to potentially fatal anaphylactic shock, requiring emergency treatment with adrenalin. It's far more likely that people, who think they have a problem with a certain food, are suffering from a food intolerance. This does not produce a life threatening response, but can produce symptoms like asthma, eczema, bloating, headache or altered bowel habits- all of which can also be caused by a number of non food triggers.

The most common foods involved in true allergies are peanuts, cow's milk and seafood. With intolerances it is much wider, but wheat, eggs and milk are common culprits.

So, how do you remove a food completely from your diet? It's estimated that 30% of allergic reactions to food occur because of inadequate labelling. Food processing is a complex business; many foods contain ingredients you might never think of. For instance, how many people would know that most brands of ice cream contain wheat? Clearly, it's not as simple as just giving up bread!

What do you do if you think you have a food allergy or intolerance? For food allergies there are some tests which are reliable. Skin prick testing is probably the most commonly used test; it looks at the immune action by pricking the skin with a minute quantity of the suspect food. Reactions show in about 15-20 minutes. The British Allergy Foundation advise this test should only be carried out by specially trained doctors or nurses in specific allergy centres. The other reliable allergy test is a blood test, which again measures immune response. It looks for specific immune products in the blood to indicate what the allergen might be.

Unfortunately food intolerance is even harder to track down. Because an intolerance does not produce an immune reaction, there is no blood or skin test which can diagnose it. However, there are dozens of dubious practitioners that will tell you they can find your intolerances, and charge you a fortune in the process! The only reliable test for food intolerance is to follow an "Elimination Diet". This is a long, slow process and takes real commitment. A State registered Dietitian can help you with this; they will supervise you through the process and make sure you are following it properly and safely. As you reintroduce foods, if you discover a problem food, the Dietitian can help you to plan your diet to make sure that you are avoiding all of the hidden foods, and also make sure you are getting all the nutrients you need. They can give you shopping aids to help you wade through the labels and be certain that all the food you are buying is not going to cause you a problem.

The bottom line is yes, there are genuine food allergies, which need to be taken very seriously. There are also food intolerances. Both can be dealt with effectively with a clear diagnosis and accurate advice. If in doubt the message has to be don't mess around with this on your own, you could spend a lot of money needlessly and also put your health at risk by missing important nutrients from your diet.