

Food Allergies vs Intolerances

Food allergies and food intolerances are easily confused. Although it's easy to mix them up, they are completely different reactions to food. Put simply, a food allergy involves the *immune system*, whereas food intolerances involve the *digestive system*.

Food Allergies

A food allergy occurs when the body's immune system reacts to a harmless food. Our immune systems protect us from bacteria, viruses and other foreign invaders. Sometimes it can react, or overreact, to things that are not normally harmful to our bodies, causing an allergy. In this instance, the cause of the allergic reaction is known as an allergen.

Any food that contains protein has the potential to cause allergic reactions in some individuals. However, most food allergies are caused by:

- Peanuts
- Tree nuts
- Eggs
- Cow's milk protein (dairy)
- Wheat
- Sesame
- Fish
- Shellfish
- Soy
- Lupin



Food allergies can develop at any age. In Australia, about one in 10 infants, one in 20 children up to five years of age, and two in 100 adults have food allergies. Symptoms of a food allergy can range from mild to severe, and generally develop very soon after consuming the food. The symptoms of mild to moderate food allergy include:

- Tingling or itching in the mouth
- Hives, itching or eczema
- Swelling of the lips, face, tongue and throat or other parts of the body
- Wheezing, nasal congestion or trouble breathing
- Abdominal pain, diarrhoea, nausea, or vomiting
- Dizziness, light-headedness, or fainting

It is also important to note that some food allergies can cause severe allergic reactions, known as anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis requires urgent medical attention and can produce life-threatening symptoms. Seek immediate emergency treatment if you or anyone around you develops any signs or symptoms of severe allergic reaction.



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Food Allergies vs Intolerances continued...

Food Intolerances

Food intolerance occurs when the body has a chemical reaction to eating a particular food or drink. Although symptoms of food intolerance can sometimes be similar to those of a food allergy, food intolerance does not involve the immune system and does not cause severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis).

In some cases, food intolerances occur due to the inability of the body to digest a food, such as lactose. Most food intolerances don't generally cause severe or harmful reactions, however they can affect general health and wellbeing if not managed properly.

Foods or groups that tend to cause intolerance reactions in some people include:

- Dairy products, including milk, cheese and yoghurt
- Caffeine
- Flavour enhancers, including monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Salicylates and amines
- Sulphites

The symptoms of food intolerance can include:

- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)
- Headaches
- Rash or hives
- Runny nose
- Uncomfortable bloating
- Stomach or bowel pain

Overall, the symptoms of food allergy and intolerance can also be caused by other conditions, so it is important to see your doctor for a medical diagnosis. For more information, visit the [Better Health Channel](#).