

FOOD INTOLERANCES & ALLERGIES

UNDERSTANDING FOOD ALLERGIES AND FOOD INTOLERANCES

Why knowing the difference matters

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Understanding Food Allergies and Food Intolerances

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My Thoughts

One of the reasons I became interested in food intolerances wasn't because I was looking for the latest health trend or searching for a miracle solution. It came from wanting to understand my own body.

Living with ARFID since childhood and later discovering I was autistic and ADHD taught me that food is about so much more than nutrition. It's connected to our senses, our emotions, our routines, our health and, for many people, their quality of life.

As I began exploring my own health, I realised there was a lot of confusion surrounding food allergies and food intolerances. People often use the two terms interchangeably, but they are very different conditions that require different approaches.

Over the years, clients have often asked me questions such as:

"How do I know if I have a food allergy?"

"Could food be causing my symptoms?"

"Should I just stop eating certain foods?"

These are important questions, but they deserve evidence-based answers rather than opinions found on social media.

My aim in this article isn't to tell you what you should or shouldn't eat. It's to help you understand the difference between food allergies and food intolerances so you can make informed decisions and know when to seek professional advice.

Why Understanding the Difference Matters

Although food allergies and food intolerances both involve reactions to food, they are not the same.

Understanding the difference is important because one can be life-threatening and requires immediate medical attention, while the other is usually not life-threatening but may still significantly affect a person's health and wellbeing.

Using the correct language also helps ensure people receive the most appropriate assessment and treatment.

What Is a Food Allergy?

A food allergy occurs when the body's immune system mistakenly identifies a harmless food as dangerous.

The immune system produces antibodies—most commonly Immunoglobulin E (IgE)—which trigger the release of chemicals such as histamine. These chemicals are responsible for many of the symptoms associated with allergic reactions.

For someone with a true food allergy, even a very small amount of the food can cause symptoms.

Reactions often occur within minutes, although some can develop a little later.

Common symptoms of a food allergy include:

Swelling of the lips, tongue or throat

Hives (urticaria)

Itching

Wheezing

Difficulty breathing

Persistent coughing

Vomiting

Dizziness

Collapse

Anaphylaxis (a severe allergic reaction requiring emergency treatment)

Anaphylaxis is a medical emergency. Anyone experiencing difficulty breathing, swelling of the airway or collapse after eating should seek emergency medical help immediately.

Common Food Allergens

In the UK, the most common food allergens include:

Milk

Eggs

Peanuts

Tree nuts

Fish

Shellfish

Wheat

Soya

Sesame

Many people with diagnosed food allergies carry adrenaline auto-injectors (such as EpiPens) and work closely with allergy specialists to manage their condition.

What Is a Food Intolerance?

Food intolerances are different.

Unlike food allergies, they do not usually involve the same immediate immune response and are generally not life-threatening.

Instead, food intolerances often involve difficulty digesting certain foods or sensitivity to particular food components.

Symptoms can appear several hours—or sometimes even days—after eating, making them much more difficult to recognise.

This is one reason why many people struggle to identify patterns without keeping a food diary or seeking professional guidance.

Common Symptoms of Food Intolerance

Food intolerances affect people differently.

Symptoms may include:

Bloating

Excessive wind

Stomach pain

Diarrhoea

Constipation

Brain fog

Fatigue

Headaches

Joint discomfort

Skin problems such as eczema

Feeling generally unwell

These symptoms are not unique to food intolerances and can occur in many other medical conditions. This is why it is important not to self-diagnose or remove large groups of foods without appropriate advice.

Why Symptoms Can Be Confusing

One of the reasons food intolerances can be difficult to identify is that symptoms are often delayed.

For example, if you eat breakfast at 8 a.m. but don't experience symptoms until later in the afternoon, you may never connect the two.

Many people also experience symptoms that fluctuate depending on:

Stress

Sleep quality

Hormonal changes

Illness

Medication

Physical activity

Overall diet

This is why understanding the whole picture is so important.

Food Allergy or Food Intolerance?

Although some symptoms overlap, there are important differences.

Common Misconceptions

One of the biggest myths I hear is:

"If I feel unwell after eating something, I must be allergic to it."

Not necessarily.

Feeling unwell after eating could be caused by many different factors, including:

Food intolerance

Food allergy

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

Coeliac disease

Gastrointestinal infections

Medication side effects

Stress and anxiety

Other medical conditions

This is why professional assessment is so important.

When Should You Seek Medical Advice?

I always encourage people not to ignore ongoing symptoms.

If you experience persistent digestive symptoms, unexplained fatigue, recurring skin problems or reactions after eating, it's worth discussing them with your GP or another appropriate healthcare professional.

If you experience symptoms of a severe allergic reaction—particularly difficulty breathing, swelling of the throat or collapse—seek emergency medical treatment immediately.

What Current Evidence Tells Us

Current guidance from organisations such as the NHS, the British Dietetic Association and the British Society for Allergy & Clinical Immunology highlights several important points:

Food allergies and food intolerances are different conditions.

Food allergies require medical assessment and management.

Food intolerances can significantly affect quality of life but are not usually life-threatening.

Restrictive diets should not be started without good reason, as they may increase the risk of nutritional deficiencies.

Keeping a food and symptom diary can sometimes help identify patterns before further assessment.

As research continues to evolve, our understanding of food reactions also develops. Remaining curious and open to new evidence is an important part of making informed decisions.

Key Takeaways

Food allergies and food intolerances are not the same.

Food allergies involve the immune system and can be life-threatening.

Food intolerances often cause delayed symptoms and can affect many aspects of wellbeing.

Many other medical conditions can produce similar symptoms.

Always seek appropriate medical advice if you have concerns about food reactions.

Before You Go...

If there's one thing I hope you take away from this article, it's that your body deserves to be listened to.

Not every symptom is caused by food.

Not every reaction is an allergy.

And not every answer can be found online.

Understanding your health is rarely about finding one single explanation. More often, it's about gently putting together the pieces of a much bigger puzzle.

Stay curious.

Ask questions.

Seek advice when you need it.

Most importantly, remember that understanding your body isn't about becoming fearful of food—it's about developing a relationship with your health that is informed, balanced and compassionate.

Thank you for taking the time to read this article. I hope it has helped you feel more confident about understanding the important differences between food allergies and food intolerances.

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Testing should be considered alongside symptoms, clinical history and appropriate professional advice. A food allergy can be serious: suspected immediate allergy symptoms require medical assessment. IgG food-reactivity testing is different from diagnostic IgE allergy testing and remains debated, so results should not be used alone to diagnose illness or begin a highly restrictive diet.