

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy occurs when there is an abnormal reaction by your immune system to a component in food, usually a protein. Your immune system responds by generating antibodies, which can trigger symptoms such as hives (a type of skin rash), swelling around the mouth, vomiting or diarrhoea, difficulty breathing, collapsing, or anaphylaxis (a very severe allergic reaction). Total avoidance of the problem food is the only solution to a food allergy.

Food allergy is most commonly seen in early childhood, and occurs in around 5% of children. Food allergy is usually 'outgrown' during childhood, except for allergies to nuts, seeds and seafood. About 1% of adults have a food allergy.

Which foods are most likely to cause allergies?

Most allergic reactions to food are caused by only a small number of foods. The most common food allergies in children are to eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, sesame seeds, wheat, soy and milk. Adults are more likely to be allergic to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, shellfish, seeds and eggs.

What is food intolerance?

Often when adults think they have a food allergy, they actually have a food intolerance instead. Food intolerance is different from a food allergy, and does not involve your immune system. It occurs when you have an enzyme deficiency (such as in lactose intolerance) or a reaction to natural or artificial substances in foods. Intolerance to a substance within foods can increase symptoms such as headaches, skin rashes or stomach upsets.

The difference between food allergy and food intolerance

Food issue	Food allergy	Food intolerance
Cause of issue	Abnormal immune system reaction.	Reactions to certain foods, but not by the immune system (e.g. enzyme deficiency or reaction to natural or added food components).
Required action	Must avoid that food completely.	Total avoidance is generally not necessary, but some dietary adjustment will be required.

What causes cow's milk allergy?

People who are allergic to cow's milk react to the protein components of the milk.

How common is cow's milk allergy?

In Australia, the true prevalence of cow's milk allergy is hard to ascertain. It is believed that only 2% of children under two years of age are truly allergic to cow's milk. Cow's milk allergy is much rarer in adults. It is also extremely uncommon for cow's milk allergy to cause asthma. Diagnosing true milk allergy is difficult and it can easily be misdiagnosed. You should consult your doctor if you suspect that you or anyone in your family may have an allergy.

Fortunately, most children grow out of cow's milk allergy by the age of four years. It is very rare to develop a true cow's milk allergy as an adult.

What is the treatment for cow's milk allergy?

Once an allergy has been diagnosed by your doctor, the offending food or foods should be eliminated from the diet. Even trace amounts can cause severe symptoms, so if cow's milk is the problem, check the labels on all manufactured foods. Avoid all foods that contain:

- Cow's milk;
- Cow's milk products, including cheese, yogurt, ice-cream, butter, ghee, buttermilk, cream, cream fraiche; and
- Cow's milk ingredients, such as milk powder, milk solids, casein and whey.

Taking a food group such as dairy out of your diet should be done with the assistance of an Accredited Practising Dietitian to make sure all your nutritional needs are still being met.

People who are allergic to cow's milk are allergic to all types of cow's milk (regardless of milk brand or type of cow) and are often allergic to the milk of other animals such as goat's milk.

If there is no improvement after taking all dairy products out of your diet, other causes of the symptoms should be investigated by your doctor. Make a record of your symptoms and all the foods and drinks that you have eaten. These notes could help your doctor with the diagnosis.

Food Allergy

Can cow's milk allergy be prevented or delayed?

If your family has a background of allergic disorders, the following general measures are good practice for minimising the risk of allergy:

- Encourage breastfeeding, particularly for the first six months, and for as long as the mother and infant wish to continue;
- Introduce solid foods around four to six months, preferably whilst breastfeeding; and
- Regular cow's milk can be introduced as a main drink in the diet after 12 months of age.

For how long should a food be avoided?

Food allergy is often outgrown by the time children reach school age, so it is important for your medical professional to test whether your child is still allergic to the food on a regular basis. This can be done by repeat allergy testing. Reintroducing an eliminated food into your child's diet must be done extremely cautiously, **ONLY** under strict medical supervision. As milk allergy is usually outgrown, it can often be successfully reintroduced under medical supervision.

What are the dangers of unnecessarily removing cow's milk from the diet?

Apart from being the biggest contributor of calcium in the Australian diet, cow's milk provides a unique package of nine other essential nutrients including:

- Protein;
- Carbohydrate;
- Vitamins (A, B12 and riboflavin); and
- Minerals (phosphorus, magnesium, potassium and zinc).

Eliminating milk and other dairy products from your diet can result in inadequate nutrition, unless an appropriate selection of substitute foods is eaten. Dairy is a rich source of calcium, and is the biggest contributor of calcium in the Australian diet. Three serves every day provides the recommended dietary intake of calcium as part of their unique nutrient package*.

For more information on food allergy visit the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy Inc at www.allergy.org.au

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* 3 serves of dairy provide approximately 100% of the average recommended dietary intake for calcium.

