Got Food Allergies? Not Sure? EN Answers Common Questions

Finally, relief for food allergy sufferers. As of January 1, food ingredient labels must indicate—in plain English—whether a product might contain proteins from the eight major food allergens (egg, fish, milk, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts and wheat). But while people with food allergies now have access to the ingredient information they need, questions linger. EN provides some answers.

Q. It seems everyone claims a food allergy these days. Are they common?
A. No. Food allergies are actually quite uncommon, though the number of people affected does seem to be on the rise. Currently, about 4% of adults and 6% of children suffer from food allergies. They may seem prevalent simply because people are so quick to use the term “food allergy” when they really have a food sensitivity or intolerance. A true food allergy involves a wayward immune system; food sensitivities do not. But sensitivities do include a wide variety of adverse food reactions, such as the gastrointestinal upset of lactose intolerance, sulfite-induced asthma or the itchy skin reaction to tartrazine (yellow food dye #5).

Q. Can adults develop food allergies after being allergy-free as children?
A. “Yes,” says Sue Hefie, Ph.D., co-director of the Food Allergy Research and Resource Program at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, citing seafood allergy as one of the more common adult-onset allergies. “However,” she adds, “most adults with food allergies have simply held onto them since they were children.”

Q. Are there more allergens today because companies use more ingredients and additives in packaged foods?
A. You’re right that more food allergens than ever have been identified—more than 160 so far. But actually, the eight major allergens—all whole foods—account for 90% of all documented food allergy reactions in the U.S. Despite a ballooning array of ingredients in manufactured foods, most (including aspartame, monosodium glutamate or MSG, artificial food colors and high fructose corn syrup) are not allergenic. There is, however, an increasing use of soy in foods, triggering a rise in the incidence of soy allergy in the U.S. People with food allergies need to check the ingredients of every food they eat, just to be sure, as a life-threatening anaphylactic reaction is always a possibility.

Q. Because of exposure as a nurse, my friend is allergic to latex. She tells me she must avoid certain foods. Why?
A. An allergy to latex is actually an allergy to the proteins found in the sap of the rubber tree, from which natural rubber latex is made (synthetic rubber is fine). These proteins are remarkably similar to proteins found in a number of foods, causing a person who is allergic to latex to cross-react to them. These foods include avocados, bananas, chestnuts, kiwi-fruit, melon, papaya, peaches, potatoes and strawberries, among other plant foods. If you’ve developed an allergy to latex, consult your allergist for a complete list of possible cross-reactive foods to avoid. The opposite is also true: If you are allergic to any of these foods, then you should avoid latex. Also, be aware that cross-reactivity of allergens isn’t limited to latex; other allergens contain cross-reactive proteins, too. During ragweed season, for example, some people can’t eat cantaloupe. And you are more likely to cross-react within a food group; for example, an allergy to one nut can trigger an allergy to another.

Q. I’m having a dinner party and one of my guests has food allergies. How can I be sure my friend won’t suffer a reaction from my cooking?
A. We suggest the following steps:
- First, run the menu by your friend early on. Provide recipes for review and offer to change any items that send up red flags.
- Avoid cross-contamination. For example, if your guest is allergic to peanuts and you make your child a peanut butter sandwich before the party, be sure to put the knife, cutting board and plate you used in the dishwasher. Wash counters thoroughly.
- Don’t get creative with recipe formulations. Secret ingredients can pose problems for food-allergic friends, especially if it’s something not typically in a dish. For example, if your guest is allergic to seafood, don’t put Asian fish sauce in your gourmet salad dressing. The same goes for adding peanut butter to chili, making cheesecake with a hazelnut crust, or any other unexpected recipe ingredients. —Kitty Brohier, M.S., R.D.
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