

# When you need to avoid a food



A guide for people with food allergy or intolerance

## What this guide contains

This guide gives information and advice for people with food allergy or intolerance, and for people buying food for them. It covers topics including:

- the difference between food allergy and intolerance
- how to spot an allergic reaction
- what to look for when buying food
- what to consider when eating out
- coeliac disease

## Being diagnosed with a food allergy or intolerance

When you are told that you have a food allergy or food intolerance, this means you will need to avoid a particular food. The health professional who diagnoses your allergy or intolerance will tell you what food or foods you are sensitive to.

They will also give you an idea of how severe your allergy or intolerance is and how careful you need to be to avoid particular foods. If you're not sure what foods you need to avoid, talk to your GP or other health professional.

Some foods can be quite hard to avoid because they are used as an ingredient in lots of different food products. This guide gives advice on how to avoid foods that you are sensitive to.

# What's the difference between food allergy and food intolerance?

Food allergy and food intolerance are both types of food sensitivity. When someone has a food allergy, their immune system reacts to a particular food as if it isn't safe.

If someone has a severe food allergy, this can cause a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis (pronounced 'anna-fill-axis'). Anaphylaxis affects the whole body, often within minutes of eating the food.

Food intolerance doesn't involve the immune system and is generally not life-threatening. But if you eat a food you are intolerant to, this could make you feel ill or affect your long-term health.

## Symptoms of an allergic reaction

The symptoms of an allergic reaction can vary and the reactions can be more or less severe on different occasions. Even if you try very hard to avoid the food that you are sensitive to, you may still eat it by accident.

Generally, you won't experience all of the symptoms at the same time and bear in mind that some of the symptoms of an allergic reaction can also be symptoms of other illnesses.

The most common symptoms of an allergic reaction include:

- ▀ coughing
- ▀ dry, itchy throat and tongue
- ▀ itchy skin or rash
- ▀ nausea and feeling bloated
- ▀ diarrhoea and/or vomiting
- ▀ wheezing and shortness of breath
- ▀ swelling of the lips and throat
- ▀ runny or blocked nose
- ▀ sore, red and itchy eyes

It's important that you and your family, friends and colleagues can tell if you are having an allergic reaction, so you can take your medication as soon as possible.

## Buying pre-packed food

It is essential to look carefully at the label on any pre-packed food you buy if you have a food allergy or intolerance yourself, or if you are buying food for someone who does. Even if you have bought the product before, you should still check the label. The recipe might have changed.

### Check the ingredients

All pre-packed foods must give a list of ingredients. Always check the ingredients on a food product to see if it contains the food you need to avoid.

### Know the different names

Sometimes foods can be called different names on the label. So make sure you know all the names for the food you are sensitive to.

For example, soya (and ingredients made from soya) can be described using names including soya flour, soya oil, soya protein isolate, soya concentrate, tofu, bean curd, textured vegetable protein (TVP), or soya lecithin.

Milk (and ingredients made from milk) can also be called different things, including casein, caseinate, caseinate salts, sodium caseinate, whey protein, whey, whey powder, milk powder, whey sugar, whey syrup, hydrolysed whey and milk glaze or glaze.

### Check for allergy statements or boxes

As well as the ingredients list, many food products have a statement or an allergy advice box on the label saying they contain a certain food, for example nuts, milk or eggs. Some manufacturers use symbols to show this.

But it isn't compulsory for food labels to give this type of statement. So if there isn't an allergy statement on the label, **don't assume the product is free from the food you are sensitive to**. Always check the ingredients.

## New labelling rules

From November 2005, food labelling rules will require pre-packed food sold in the UK or the rest of the European Union (EU) to show clearly on the label if it contains one of the following (or if one of its ingredients contains, or is made from, one of these):

- ▶ peanuts
- ▶ nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, Brazil nuts, cashews, pecans, pistachios and macadamia nuts
- ▶ eggs
- ▶ milk
- ▶ crustaceans (including prawns, crab and lobster)
- ▶ fish
- ▶ sesame seeds
- ▶ cereals containing gluten (including wheat, rye, barley and oats)
- ▶ soya
- ▶ celery
- ▶ mustard
- ▶ sulphur dioxide and sulphites (preservatives used in some foods and drinks)

The new rules should make it easier for people to avoid the above foods in pre-packed food products. However, some people are sensitive to foods that are not on this list, so always check the ingredients carefully.

Some food labels say 'may contain nuts' or 'may contain seeds'. This means that even though nuts or seeds aren't deliberately included in the food, the manufacturer can't be sure that the product doesn't accidentally contain small amounts of them. If you have a nut or seed allergy you should avoid these food products.

If you think a food product has been labelled wrongly, report this to the trading standards service at your local authority.

## Supermarket lists

Most of the major supermarket chains produce lists of the products they sell that do not deliberately contain particular foods (such as nuts, milk, eggs and gluten), and are produced in a way that prevents these ingredients getting into the products accidentally. Contact the supermarket for more information.

Sometimes these lists can go out of date as products are launched or discontinued, or recipes change. So always check the label on every food product you buy, even if it's on one of these lists.

Many supermarkets and health food shops sell special ranges of products that don't contain foods such as wheat, gluten or dairy products, but these can be expensive. Bear in mind that some foods that are not specifically marketed to people with a food allergy or intolerance could still be free from the food you are sensitive to.

**Always check the ingredients.**

### Buying food online

Most websites selling food give information about their products that will help you choose those that don't contain the food you need to avoid. But sometimes this information might not be up to date, so always check the label every time you have food delivered.

## Eating out

Some people need to be more careful than others to avoid the food they are sensitive to. This is because a tiny amount could make them very ill or cause a life-threatening reaction. The following advice about restaurants and foods that aren't pre-packed is aimed at people with more severe food allergies or severe coeliac disease. (See the section on being diagnosed at the start of this guide.)

If you have a severe allergy or severe coeliac disease, remember that when you eat food prepared by someone else, for example in a restaurant, you can't be absolutely sure that it won't contain the food you are sensitive to. But there are things you can do to reduce the chances of having a problem.

### Tell the restaurant

- When you book a table at a restaurant, tell the person taking the booking about your food allergy and ask them to check with the chef if they can provide you with a meal that doesn't contain the food you are sensitive to. If they are not sure, it's better to eat somewhere else.
- When you arrive at a restaurant, make sure the waiter or waitress knows about your allergy and how serious it is. If you are not confident that they understand how important it is for you to avoid a particular food then it's better not to eat there.

### Ask about the dishes

- Read the menu carefully to see if there is any mention of the food you are sensitive to in the name or description of a dish. Remember that the food might not be mentioned, so always check with the waiter or waitress.

- Tell them what dishes you are planning to order and ask them to check with the chef that they definitely do not contain the food you need to avoid. If you can, speak to the chef. If the staff don't seem sure that the dish is free from that food, it's better to order something else.
- If you have a nut or seed allergy, ask what oils have been used in salad dressings and if there are any nuts or seeds in the garnishes.

### Watch out for 'hidden' ingredients

- Be aware of foods that contain the food you are sensitive to, for example almonds in marzipan, peanuts in satay sauce, wheat flour in sauces, oyster sauce in Chinese food, fish sauce in Thai dishes, milk in some crisps or sesame seeds in houmous.
- If you are allergic to nuts or peanuts, be especially careful when choosing a dessert, because nuts are often used in cakes, trifles etc, for example as a decoration on top, or in the base, and they might not be included in the name or description of the dessert.

### Be prepared

- If you have a food allergy, always take your medication with you. If at any time during the meal you think that you may be having a reaction, stop eating and take your medication. If you think you are having a severe reaction, ask your friends, family or the restaurant staff to call for an ambulance with a paramedic.

If you have an allergy to nuts, seeds or peanuts, you should be very careful with Malaysian, Thai, Chinese and Indian dishes, because these commonly contain nuts or peanuts, or are cooked in oils made from nuts, seeds or groundnuts (another name for peanuts). Many vegetarian dishes also contain nuts.

Remember that nuts could be ground up, which means you might not be able to see them. For example, ground almonds or peanut flour can be used to thicken sauces in Indian food and the chef may not think of this as nuts or peanuts when you ask about the content of the meal.

If you can't be confident that dishes are free from nuts, seeds and peanuts (and not cooked in nut, groundnut or sesame oil) it's safer to avoid eating meals or takeaways from these types of restaurant.

**Remember, meals are not always made the same way, so if you have eaten a particular dish in one restaurant, don't assume it will be OK the next time or in a different restaurant.**

## Self-service areas

Some restaurants and cafes have self-service areas where food is in open containers. Even though some dishes might not contain the food you are sensitive to, it's easy for a small amount to get into a dish accidentally, either because containers are next to each other, or because people use the same spoons for different dishes. If you have a severe food allergy it's safer to avoid eating food from this kind of self-service area.

## Buying foods that aren't pre-packed

Foods that aren't pre-packed don't have to be labelled with the same information as pre-packed foods, so you might not be able to check the ingredients. Foods that aren't pre-packed include foods sold from a bakery, deli counter or salad bar, sandwiches sold to be eaten straight away, and foods weighed and sold loose.

It's possible that small amounts of the food you need to avoid could have got into one of these products, for example, from being next to another food, from a knife or spoon, or from being wrapped in paper or a bag that has touched another food. If you have a severe allergy it's generally safer to avoid these foods.

## Medication

There isn't a cure for food allergy or intolerance, so the only way to prevent a reaction is to avoid the food you are sensitive to.

If you have a severe food allergy, you will probably be prescribed antihistamines and a pen containing adrenaline (known as epinephrine). This is to inject yourself if you have a reaction. **Never go anywhere without your medication.**

If you, or your child, are prescribed an adrenaline pen, your health professional will show you how to use it. If you're not sure what to do, ask them for advice.

People who have a severe food allergy should also wear a bracelet or necklace giving details of their allergy, so medical staff will know about it in an emergency.

## Friends and family

Make sure your family, friends and work colleagues know about your food allergy or intolerance and what to look out for when buying food for you. If you have a severe food allergy, you should also make sure they know what to do if you have a reaction.

If you have a child who has been diagnosed with a food allergy, it's especially important that you and anyone who looks after them (including teachers and the

parents of friends who they might visit) know how to avoid the foods they are sensitive to and what to do if they have an allergic reaction, including how to use their adrenaline pen.

Schools should have plans to deal with an emergency, but you should discuss your child's needs in detail with their school.

## Eating a healthy diet

It's important for everyone to eat a healthy balanced diet. Sometimes people with a food allergy or intolerance worry that not being able to eat a certain food will harm their health. But it's the overall balance of your diet that matters.

So if you can't eat certain foods, there are other foods you can eat to give you the nutrients you need. If you are concerned about your diet, it's a good idea to talk to a dietitian, who will be able to advise you about eating a healthy diet while avoiding the foods you are sensitive to.

You can contact a dietitian through your local hospital or GP surgery. To find details of registered dietitians working in private practice in your area, visit the Dietitians Unlimited website ([www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk](http://www.dietitiansunlimited.co.uk)) or send a stamped addressed envelope marked 'private practice' to The British Dietetic Association, 5th Floor, Charles House, 148/9 Great Charles St, Queensway, Birmingham B3 3HT.

Remember, don't cut food groups out of your diet without medical advice.

You can find out more about healthy eating and food allergies and intolerance at [www.eatwell.gov.uk](http://www.eatwell.gov.uk)

## Coeliac disease

About one in 100 people in the UK has coeliac disease, also called gluten intolerance or gluten sensitivity. Coeliac disease is an auto-immune disease, which means the body's immune system attacks itself. The type of reaction it causes is different to a food allergy – it doesn't cause anaphylaxis. Some people with coeliac disease don't realise they have it.

If you are diagnosed with coeliac disease you need to avoid eating foods containing gluten.

### Foods to avoid

Gluten is a protein found in wheat and also in a number of other cereals including rye and barley. If you have coeliac disease you should avoid foods made from these cereals, including most types of bread, pasta, pizza, pastry and cakes.

Wheat ingredients are used in many foods, such as some sausages and burgers, and many sauces. Foods in batter or breadcrumbs aren't suitable for people with coeliac disease either. Always check the ingredients on the foods you buy.

If you have coeliac disease you will also need to avoid some alcoholic drinks made from barley, such as beer and lager.

Rice, potatoes and corn don't contain gluten, so these are OK to eat. You can also buy special products that are suitable for people with coeliac disease, such as gluten-free pasta and bread.

Oats contain a protein that is similar to gluten, but not exactly the same. It's also possible for small amounts of other cereals, such as wheat, to get into oat products when the crop is growing, or being harvested or transported. Research has shown that some people with coeliac disease can't tolerate oats or oat products. At the moment, medical experts don't have enough evidence to decide whether all people with coeliac disease should avoid oats.

If you have coeliac disease you will probably be advised to avoid oats, as well as wheat, rye and barley, especially when you are first diagnosed. You should discuss the decision whether to start eating oats again with your health professional because oats may not be suitable for some people with coeliac disease.

It's important to understand that products labelled 'wheat-free' aren't the same as those labelled 'gluten-free'.

Wheat-free products may contain other cereals, such as rye or barley, so these might not be suitable for someone with coeliac disease (unless they are also labelled 'gluten-free').

Gluten-free products won't contain gluten, but they may still contain other proteins found in wheat (albumins, globulins and starch granule proteins). So these might not be suitable for people who are intolerant or allergic to wheat.

## Useful contacts

### **Allergy UK**

3 White Oak Square  
London Road  
Swanley  
Kent  
BR8 7AG

helpline 01322 619898

email [info@allergyuk.org](mailto:info@allergyuk.org)

[www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org)

*Charity for people with allergy  
and chemical sensitivity*

### **The Anaphylaxis Campaign**

PO Box 275  
Farnborough  
GU14 6SX

tel 01252 542 029

email [info@anaphylaxis.org.uk](mailto:info@anaphylaxis.org.uk)

[www.anaphylaxis.org.uk](http://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk)

*Membership-based organisation providing  
information and guidance*

### **Asthma UK**

Providence House  
Providence Place  
London  
N1 0NT

tel 08457 010203

[www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk)

*Charity dedicated to improving health  
and well-being of people with asthma*

### **Coeliac UK**

PO Box 220  
High Wycombe  
Buckinghamshire HP11 2HY  
tel 01494 437278  
[www.coeliac.co.uk](http://www.coeliac.co.uk)

*Charity aiming to improve life for people  
with coeliac disease*

### **Foods Matter**

5 Lawn Road  
London  
NW3 2XS

tel 020 7722 2866

email [info@foodsmatter.com](mailto:info@foodsmatter.com)

[www.foodsmatter.com](http://www.foodsmatter.com)

*Magazine for people with food sensitivity*

### **The British Dietetic Association**

5th Floor Charles House  
148/9 Great Charles St  
Queensway  
Birmingham  
B3 3HT

tel 0121 200 8080

email [info@bda.uk.com](mailto:info@bda.uk.com)

[www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)

### **The British Nutrition Foundation**

High Holborn House  
52-54 High Holborn  
London  
WC1V 6RQ

tel 020 7404 6504

email [postbox@nutrition.org.uk](mailto:postbox@nutrition.org.uk)

[www.nutrition.org.uk](http://www.nutrition.org.uk)

The Food Standards Agency's consumer advice and information site:

**[www.eatwell.gov.uk](http://www.eatwell.gov.uk)**

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