

Allergies and Sensitivities

What is an allergy or sensitivity? Allergies are responses mounted by the immune system to a particular food, inhalant, or chemical. The term “sensitivity” is general and may include true allergies—reactions that do not affect the immune system (and therefore are not technically allergies)—and reactions for which the cause has yet to be determined. In popular terminology, the terms “allergies” and “sensitivities” are often used to mean the same thing and will be used interchangeably in this section, although from a conventional medical point of view, many sensitivities would not be considered allergies.

What conditions are related to allergies? According to J. C. Breneman, M.D., author of the book *Basics of Food Allergy*,¹ many health conditions are related to allergies and have been the subject of independent studies. Even so, any relationship between the condition and the allergy needs to be considered with the aid of a nutritionally oriented doctor.

Acne

Although supported primarily by anecdotes, some doctors of natural medicine believe that food allergy may play a role in at least adult acne.²

Arthritis, rheumatoid

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) may be linked to food allergies and sensitivities. In many people, RA is made worse when

they eat foods to which they are allergic or sensitive and is made better by avoiding these foods.^{3 4 5 6} English researchers have suggested that one-third of people with RA can control the disease completely through allergy elimination.⁷

Asthma

Unrecognized food allergy is a contributing factor in a significant number of asthmatics,⁸ a link that has been confirmed by double-blind research, particularly for nuts, peanuts, dairy, eggs, and soy,⁹ though other substances have been implicated elsewhere.¹⁰ Some allergic reactions in asthmatics can be life-threatening.¹¹

Attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder

ADD (or ADHD), learning disability, and/or childhood hyperactivity has been linked in some studies to certain foods, inhalant allergens, and food colors.^{12 13 14} In a study of twenty children, their poor ability to concentrate and behavior problems vanished when allergic foods were removed from their diets.¹⁵ The Feingold diet and a hypoallergenic diet have been used with ADD. In some studies the Feingold diet helped,^{16 17 18} though in another study it did not.¹⁹ Studies have shown that eliminating individual allergenic foods and additives from the diet can help children with attention problems.^{20 21}

Bed-wetting (nocturnal enuresis)

If there is no medical cause for bed-wetting, allergies should be investigated. Several researchers have found allergies to be an important cause of bed-wetting.^{22 23}

Urinary tract infection

People who have recurrent or chronic urinary tract infections should discuss the possible role of allergies with a nutritionally oriented doctor. Chronic infections have been linked to allergies in many reports.^{24 25 26 27}

Yeast infection

Allergies have been reported to cause recurrent yeast vaginitis. When the allergens are avoided and the allergies treated, the chronic recurring yeast infections sometimes are resolved.²⁸

Canker sores

Some studies show food sensitivities or allergies may make mouth ulcers worse.^{29 30 31} However, a double blind study found allergies to play only a minor role.³²

Colic

Thirty-eight bottle-fed and seventy-seven breast-fed babies who had colic were studied in a double blind, randomized, placebo-controlled trial. Distress was reduced by 25–39% on a diet free of milk, wheat, and nuts.³³ Other foods are also likely to exacerbate colic in some infants.

Constipation

A double blind trial found that chronic constipation and problems associated with it can be triggered by intolerance to cow's milk in two-thirds of constipated infants studied.³⁴ Symptoms went away in most of those infants kept away from cow's milk. Foods other than dairy might

also trigger chronic constipation in some individuals (adults).

Crohn's disease

One study reported that people with Crohn's disease were most likely to react to cereals, dairy, and yeast.³⁵ Other reports confirm that Crohn's can be exacerbated by food sensitivities.³⁶

Depression

Although some of the research has produced mixed results,³⁷ several double blind studies have shown that food allergies may trigger mental symptoms, including depression.^{38 39}

Diarrhea

Sensitivity to a food is a common cause of non-infectious diarrhea.⁴⁰ People with chronic diarrhea problems not attributable to other causes should discuss the possibility of food sensitivity with a nutritionally oriented doctor.

Ear infections (recurrent)

The incidence of allergy among children with recurrent ear infections is much higher than among the general public.⁴¹ In one study, more than half of all children with recurrent ear infections were found to be allergic to foods. Removing those foods led to significant improvement in 86% of the allergic children tested.⁴² Other reports show similar results.^{43 44}

Eczema

Eczema may be triggered by allergies.^{45 46} A nutritionally oriented doctor should be consulted to determine if allergies are a factor. Once the trigger for the allergy has been identified, avoidance of the allergen can lead to significant improvement.⁴⁷

Gallbladder attacks

Some doctors report that food sensitivities may exacerbate gallbladder attacks in people who have gallstones. Preliminary research has found that foods most commonly reported to be triggers include eggs, pork, and onion, though specific offending foods may vary considerably from person to person.⁴⁸

Gastrointestinal symptoms

Vague gastrointestinal (GI) symptoms (such as abdominal pain, bloating, gas, and diarrhea) that are not caused by serious disease, can sometimes be triggered by food sensitivities. In one double blind trial, people with vague GI problems believed to be caused by dairy were given dairy to see how their bodies would react.⁴⁹ These people were not lactose intolerant. Various indicators of immunity changed as a result of the dairy challenge, showing that their bodies were reacting to the dairy in an abnormal way. However, the indicator of a true dairy allergy—what doctors call milk-specific immunoglobulin E—was normal in most of these people. This study suggests that vague GI symptoms unrelated to serious disease can be caused by food sensitivities that are neither lactose intolerance nor true allergies.

Glaucoma

At least two older reports claim that allergy may exacerbate, though not cause, glaucoma.^{50 51}

Hay fever

Hay fever may be related to food allergies.⁵²

High blood pressure

Limited research has reported that food allergy may contribute to high blood pressure in some people.⁵³

Hives

Double blind research has shown that most chronic hives (urticaria) is caused by food sensitivities and that avoiding these offending food leads to long-term improvement.⁵⁴ In this report evidence showed that many of these reactions may not be true allergies, which makes proper diagnosis more difficult though not impossible for nutritionally oriented doctors.

Hypoglycemia

Some symptoms of low blood sugar may be related to or made worse by food allergies.⁵⁵

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

Some,⁵⁶ and perhaps most,⁵⁷ people with IBS are sensitive to certain foods. People who have IBS often experience improvement when food sensitivities are discovered and the particular foods are avoided.

Migraine headaches

Migraines can be triggered by allergies and may be relieved by identifying and avoiding the “problem” foods.^{58 59 60 61} In fact, the preponderance of this research shows that most migraines appear to be triggered by allergies. Uncovering these foods, with the help of a nutritionally oriented doctor, is often a useful way to treat migraines. In children suffering migraines who also have epilepsy, there is evidence that eliminating offending foods may also reduce seizures.⁶²

Musculoskeletal pain (including back pain)

Ingestion of allergenic foods has been reported to produce a variety of musculoskeletal syndromes in susceptible individuals.⁶³

Nephrotic syndrome

Several studies have found a link between nephrotic syndrome (a kidney disease) and allergies. In one study nephrotic syndrome patients responded when the allergens were removed from their diet;⁶⁴ in another study, patients did not respond.⁶⁵

Obesity

Although the relationship between food sensitivities and body weight remains uncertain, according to one researcher, chronic food allergy may lead to overeating, resulting in obesity.⁶⁶

Psoriasis

Anecdotal evidence suggests that people with psoriasis may improve on a hypoallergenic diet.⁶⁷ One study reported

that eliminating gluten (found in wheat, oats, rye, and barley) improved psoriasis in some people.⁶⁸

Rhinitis

Chronic or recurrent infection in the nose or sinuses may be related to food and/or inhalant allergies.^{69 70} Similarly, hay fever may also be related to food allergies.⁷¹

Ulcer, duodenal

Eating foods that a person is allergic to can aggravate peptic ulcers,⁷² and exposure to allergic foods may actually cause stomach bleeding.⁷³

Upper respiratory infection (chronic/recurring)

People who have recurrent or chronic infections should discuss the possible role of allergies with a nutritionally oriented doctor. Chronic infections have been linked to allergies in many reports.^{74 75 76 77}

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