

Peanut and tree nut allergy

Introduction

Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) can be triggered by a wide range of foods. Theoretically almost any food may be implicated, but the most common culprits are peanuts and tree nuts. Tree nuts include almonds, Brazils, hazelnuts, cashews, walnuts pecans and pistachios.

Peanut allergy among children has received widespread and shocking publicity in the UK media, and many people gain the impression that all cases are severe. This is not so; some children experience only mild symptoms. However, because severity is difficult to predict, all cases should be assessed by an allergy specialist, or a GP with a special interest in allergy. Even mild symptoms such as a tingling of the lips should never be ignored because it is possible that future reactions may be more severe. This applies to both peanut and tree nut allergy.

People at risk of severe reactions may be prescribed injectable adrenaline (such as EpiPen or Anapen). This should be carried at all times.

How common is it?

The prevalence of peanut allergy among children is believed to have tripled during the 1990s. A research team based on the Isle of Wight found in 2002 that around one in 70 children across the UK was allergic to peanuts, compared with one in 200 a decade before. This rise may reflect the early age at which peanut products are introduced to young children. When at a slightly later age tree nuts are introduced into the diet, these too cause allergy problems in a growing number of cases.

Is it life-long?

Peanut allergy was once thought to be life-long in all cases. But recently it has been shown that about 20 per cent of young children grow out of their peanut allergy by the age of five. Any five-year-old who has been free of peanut allergy symptoms for more than a year may possibly have outgrown the allergy. The child can be referred to a specialist allergy centre for "challenge testing" – in which peanuts are introduced to the child in a

controlled way. Research also suggests that a small number of young children outgrow allergy to tree nuts.

Teenagers

Teenagers and young adults may be more at risk of life-threatening reactions than younger children. But their allergies can be well managed so long as they always carry prescribed medication, learn how to use it, and are extremely vigilant when food is around. A guidance booklet for allergic teenagers is available from the Anaphylaxis Campaign.

Avoiding peanuts and tree nuts

Peanuts can turn up under the names groundnuts, earth nuts and monkey nuts. People allergic to almonds should avoid almond essence.

Roasting and heat treatment do not reduce the allergenicity of peanuts or tree nuts. In fact laboratory experiments have suggested that roasting and heating peanuts (but not boiling) may increase their allergenicity. There have been no studies involving human subjects so our advice is to avoid all forms of peanut.

It is important to read food labels thoroughly, even if you are buying a product you have eaten before. Recipes do sometimes change. Check both the inner and outer wrapping of multi packs.

Foods most likely to contain peanuts or tree nuts include:

- **Cakes, biscuits, pastries, ice cream, desserts.**
- **Cereal bars, confectionery.**
- **Vegetarian products such as veggie burgers.**
- **Salads and salad dressings.**
- **Satay sauce, curries, Chinese, Thai or Indonesian dishes.**

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- Marzipan and praline (confectionery products made with nuts).
- Salad dressings may contain unrefined nut oils.

The above list is not exhaustive.

Foods sold in restaurants and other catering outlets, or at in-store bakery and delicatessen counters, are generally unlabelled and so pose a particular problem. It is important to be direct with staff, pointing out the seriousness of the allergy. If the staff cannot offer you an assurance that your meal is safe, it is best to eat elsewhere.

Should peanut oil be avoided?

Research into the allergenicity of peanut oil concluded that refined peanut oil poses little or no risk to people with peanut allergy. To find out more, request the Anaphylaxis Campaign fact sheet, "Peanut oil - your questions answered."

Medicines, soaps, cosmetics and personal care products sometimes contain peanut or nut oil. It is likely that this will be refined oil and unlikely to cause reactions. But researchers have suggested there is another issue to be considered here. They are looking at the possibility that skin preparations containing refined peanut oil may cause allergic sensitisation (the process whereby someone becomes allergic to something in the first place). More research is needed.

Other legumes

Peanuts (*arachis hypogaea*) are actually legumes. A small percentage of people with peanut allergy react to other legumes, such as peas, beans and lentils. Care is needed, but most will find they can tolerate these other legumes without problems.

If you are allergic to peanuts, watch out for lupin flour, also a legume. This is used in a very small number of baked goods, particularly those made on the Continent. Research has shown that some people who are peanut-allergic react to lupin.

More commonly, people with peanut allergy react to tree nuts. Many allergy experts advise peanut-allergic patients to avoid tree nuts, and vice versa.

Airline travel

People with peanut allergy often express concern that they may have a reaction during air travel, caused by the smell of the free peanut snacks distributed to passengers. We believe this to be an unlikely cause of symptoms for the vast majority of people and – when they do occur – they are likely to be mild. But please be guided by your doctor or consultant, and your allergy history. If you believe you may react in this way and are planning to fly, contact the airline well in advance. Some airlines have withdrawn peanut snacks altogether and others will consider removing them on a specified flight.

The most likely cause of reactions in flight is through eating peanuts or nuts present in airline food. This is solved by playing safe and taking your own food on the plane. The second most likely cause is skin contact. If a passenger handling peanuts has touched the fold-down tray or another surface, there is a risk that a subsequent, allergic passenger may touch the same surface, possibly transferring peanut allergen to the face or mouth. To minimise the risk, take "wet wipes" to clean surfaces.

For more information, request our fact sheet, "Food allergy and airline travel."

■ *This fact sheet is based on information available at the time of going to press but may be subject to change. Remember too that all of us are different and individual cases require individual medical attention. Please be guided by your GP or consultant.*

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