

Wheat allergy

What is wheat allergy?

Allergy occurs when the body's immune system reacts to something that is usually harmless because it mistakenly registers that substance as a threat. In wheat-allergic people, the immune system treats one or more of the proteins in wheat as a danger to the body and starts an allergic reaction when wheat is eaten, touched or inhaled.

The vast majority of people who experience adverse reactions to wheat are not wheat-allergic – they are either wheat intolerant or have coeliac disease. Wheat intolerance is not triggered by the immune system and cannot be diagnosed with the use of standard allergy tests (such as blood or skin tests). It affects the digestion and common symptoms include digestive discomfort, diarrhoea and bloating. It is more common than wheat allergy.

Coeliac disease is a response by the immune system but is not an allergic response. It is a condition where some gluteins (proteins found in wheat and some other cereals) damage the small bowel lining and the gut. Visit www.coeliac.co.uk for information about coeliac disease.

This information sheet will be confined to wheat allergy.

Diagnosis of wheat allergy

See your GP and ask to be referred to an NHS allergy clinic. Diagnosis will involve questions about your medical, family and food history and you may be given a skin-prick test and/or blood test. However, these tests are not perfect. Many people with allergy to grass pollen have a positive skin prick test to wheat, due to common allergenic properties in wheat and grass pollen. This might suggest they are allergic to wheat, but they do not actually react to it.

The most reliable test will be a food challenge. This involves being given tiny amounts of the allergen in a hospital setting to see if a reaction takes place. If you do not react to the first dose of wheat, another, slightly larger dose will be given. This will continue either until a reaction takes place or the highest

dose has been reached. Medical staff will be on hand to treat you at the first sign of a reaction.

How common is wheat allergy?

There are no accurate figures. Clinical experience suggests it is very uncommon – far less common, say, than peanut, egg or milk allergy.

Wheat allergy occurs in children as well as adults, but is usually outgrown in early infancy.

Certain people such as bakers are more prone to wheat allergy than others because they come into prolonged contact with wheat every day. This is a condition known as baker's asthma.

Symptoms of wheat allergy

Allergic reactions to wheat usually begin within minutes after eating or inhaling wheat. They can begin after a few hours. Symptoms vary from person to person, and may also vary from one occasion to the next, but you may get symptoms affecting one or more of the following:

- The skin (urticaria, atopic eczema, facial swelling);
- The gastrointestinal tract (oral allergy syndrome, abdominal cramps, nausea and vomiting);
- The respiratory tract (asthma or allergic rhinitis);
- Rarely, anaphylactic shock.

The risk of a severe reaction is low for the vast majority of wheat-allergic people. In some, the food eaten in conjunction with exercise may trigger a reaction. This may be severe.

What to avoid

Avoidance of wheat and wheat-containing foods is the first step in the management of wheat allergy.

Always check ingredients lists, even when you have safely eaten something before. The alternatives to wheat suggested in this information sheet are a handy guide – but checking is still important.

The Anaphylaxis Campaign

Ingredients to avoid include:

Bread – a major problem food. Rye bread or crispbread can be an alternative, but double check that it hasn't been made with wheat or wheat products. Rice crackers can also be used as a bread substitute.

You may find wheat-free bread in specialist shops. Check that it is labelled wheat free and not just "gluten free".

Products labelled "gluten-free" are likely to prove tempting – but some may not be suitable. The description "gluten-free" is based on the principle that this level will be safe for people with coeliac disease. But there is a difference between coeliac disease and acute allergy – the latter being triggered by much smaller amounts. Gluten present at tiny levels may be a problem for someone with wheat allergy if a reasonable portion is eaten. People with severe wheat allergy should be cautious and ask the manufacturer whether tiny amounts of gluten might be present – through cross-contamination, for example.

Breadcrumbs – these are often used in processed foods such as fish fingers. Breaded meats or burgers must be avoided.

Cereals – wheat-based cereals must be avoided, as must those with wheat products added. Terms to look for on the label and avoid include bran, bulghar wheat, couscous, rusk, semolina, wheat (including varieties such as kamut, spelt and triticale) and wheatgerm.

Choose rice, corn (maize), rye, millet or oat-based breakfast cereals instead. When choosing cereals to make part of a meal, some alternatives are polenta (made from maize), barley couscous (a Moroccan speciality), all the different varieties of rice, quinoa (pronounced keen-wha), and oats.

Desserts and sweet things – anything containing wheat or wheat flour is a problem food. This includes cakes, pastries, ice cream wafers and cones, biscuits and doughnuts. Suitable foods include fruit, custard, meringues and rye-based cookies – but always double check.

Drinks – a few speciality beers, usually from Germany and Belgium, may be made using wheat.

Hydrolysed vegetable protein (HVP) can be derived from wheat. It is used to give a savoury flavour to products such as sauces, soups and gravies.

Modified starch – avoid modified wheat starch.

Pasta – avoid any pasta made with wheat or semolina flour. Remember that pasta is found in some soups such as minestrone. There are now pastas on the market made from corn, rice and buckwheat.

Soy sauce – or soya sauce. This is widely used in Far Eastern dishes and in soups, gravies, stews and sauces. A small amount of wheat is usually used to produce this sauce so it should be avoided unless it is clearly marked Wheat Free.

Wheat flour – or whole wheat flour. As well as being present in bread and pastry, wheat flour can be present in gravy, salad dressings, sauces, soups and other processed foods. Read labels carefully.

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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