



Soya allergy

What is soya?

Soya is a food protein derived from the soya bean, a legume.

Soya (also known as soy) is extremely common in western diets. It is eaten as whole soya beans, as flour (which might be processed further into textured vegetable protein) or as soya oil. In addition, soya is an ingredient in many processed foods, where it is used variously as an emulsifier and stabiliser.

Soya milk is sometimes suggested as an alternative to cow's milk formula where breast feeding is not possible. However it is not recommended for babies of six months or under. After six months, soya milk may be considered but it is important to seek the advice of a health professional particularly where an infant is susceptible to allergy (either because they have already reacted to a food, or through their family history). Some infants develop allergy to soya once they are exposed to it. A suitable alternative would be an extensively hydrolysed casein formula. These are far less allergenic and in most cases are tolerated by milk allergic infants.

How common is soya allergy?

Allergy to soya is uncommon in the UK compared with milk, egg, peanut and fish allergy. Some reports suggest that children with soya allergy have a good chance of outgrowing it, but how often this occurs is not clear.

Allergy to other foods

People with soya allergy often react to other legumes such as peas and lentils and quite a significant proportion are also allergic to peanuts. If someone in your family is soya-allergic, a referral to an allergy clinic is important so these possibilities can be addressed through allergy testing.

The symptoms

Symptoms of soya allergy among children are frequently mild and may simply involve a rash.

Much more rarely, there may be severe symptoms including breathing difficulties and anaphylaxis. To our knowledge there have been no fatalities triggered by soya in the UK. But in Sweden, soya allergy has been reported as a relatively common cause of life threatening allergic reactions.

Avoiding soya

Because soya can be found in many processed foods, vigilance is needed.

New EU legislation effective from November 2005 compels food manufacturers to clearly indicate the presence of certain allergens, including soya, in their products. For some time, many food companies have been changing their labelling in line with the new regulations. But for a while, there will still be some products on the shelves that meet the old labelling requirements. If they were labelled before November 25th 2005 they will be allowed to remain on the shelves until the end of their shelf life.

For the time being, soya-allergic people should note that soya present in compound ingredients (such as textured vegetable protein) will not necessarily be declared on the ingredient list.

Is there a link between milk and soya allergy?

There is no common protein in soya and cow's milk and therefore no direct link. However, soya is potentially as allergenic as cow's milk and therefore if soya milk is fed to an infant who has already been shown to be cow's milk allergic, there is some chance of that child becoming allergic to soya. Most doctors would not recommend the use of soya milk as a suitable alternative to cow's milk for a child who



is thought to be susceptible to allergy and would prefer to use an extensively hydrolysed casein formula, which is less allergenic and in most cases tolerated by milk allergic infants. As stated above, soya formulae are not recommended for any child of six months or under.

There is also some evidence that infants who are susceptible to allergy (through their family history) might be at risk of becoming peanut allergic if they are fed soya. However more research needs to be done to confirm or refute this.

Shopping hints

Bakery products – Soya flour is used extensively in the bakery industry and is present in many breads. As fresh bread from bakeries does not carry ingredient lists, it is best to go for pre-packaged bread and check the ingredients. Other foods to watch out for include cakes and biscuits.

Infant foods – Some may contain soya flour.

Vegetable protein – Hydrolysed vegetable protein (HVP) and textured vegetable protein (TVP) can both be derived from soya.

Lecithin - Lecithin (E322) is an emulsifier normally derived from unrefined soya oil, and occasionally from rapeseed oil. Although the risk of a severe reaction to soya lecithin may be small, we advise soya-allergic people to play safe and avoid it. Soya lecithin will have to be labelled under the new EU Directive.

Soya oil – Refined soya oil is likely to be safe for the vast majority of people with soya allergy. It is used in many foods including salad dressings and margarine. Unrefined soya oil would be more risky but this is rarely, if ever, used.

Soya sauce – Also known as soy sauce. This is widely used in Far Eastern recipes and is also commonly used to add a savoury flavour to soups, gravies, stews and sauces.

Tofu – Another name for soya bean curd. Tofu is often used as a protein source for vegetarians or others cutting down on meat. Soya bean curd is traditionally used in some stir fries and soups in the Far East.

Medicines – Always ask your pharmacist if soya is an ingredient of medicines. For example, some asthma inhalers contain soya lecithin.

The Anaphylaxis Campaign
PO Box 275
Farnborough, Hampshire
GU14 6SX

Helpline 01252 542029
Administration 01252 546100
Fax 01252 377140
Email info@anaphylaxis.org.uk
website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk