

Allergy to fenugreek (also known as methi)

The seed of the fenugreek plant is used in Indian-style spiced foods, such as curries. Allergic reactions to fenugreek have been reported, although as far as we know these are rare. This article is intended as information for people who are allergic to fenugreek or think they may be.

Symptoms

The symptoms of a food allergy can come on rapidly. These may include nettle rash (otherwise known as hives or urticaria) anywhere on the body, or a tingling or itchy feeling in the mouth.

More serious symptoms of a food allergy may include:

- Swelling in the face, throat and/or mouth
- Difficulty breathing
- Severe asthma
- Abdominal (stomach) pain, feeling sick and vomiting

The term for this more serious form of allergy is anaphylaxis. In extreme cases there could be a dramatic fall in blood pressure. The person may become weak and floppy and may have a sense of something terrible happening. This may lead to collapse and unconsciousness. On rare occasions, death from a food allergy can occur. To find out more about anaphylaxis and its treatment (adrenaline), read our factsheets:

<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/living-with-serious-allergies/factsheets/>

In people allergic to fenugreek, eating it is just one way that symptoms can occur. In 1997, a scientific team in India reported a case in which allergy symptoms were triggered by inhalation (breathing in) of fenugreek seed powder. The same team reported on a patient with asthma who developed facial swelling and wheezing after applying fenugreek paste to their scalp as a treatment for dandruff.

Where is fenugreek used?

Fenugreek seeds, which come whole and ground, are used to flavour many foods including curry powders, spice blends and teas. The sprouted seeds may be added to salads or cooked.

Our enquiries have found that an essential oil obtained from the fenugreek seed can be used as food flavouring in imitation maple syrup, vanilla compositions, liquorice, pickles and other foods. The roasted seed is a coffee substitute.

Fenugreek is not one of the 14 allergens that must be emphasised (for example in bold) in food ingredients lists. People with allergy to fenugreek are advised to always read food labels carefully. When eating out or buying a takeaway, question staff very directly.

Fenugreek and the link with peanut

Some people with peanut allergy also react to fenugreek (both are legumes and therefore closely related). This is because of a process known as cross-reactivity – in which the proteins in two foods are similar in structure.

Evidence for this link came from 2009 reports from Norway. A Norwegian allergy register recorded 15 patients with peanut allergy who reacted to curry – which often contains fenugreek. Doctors studied cross-reactivity using serum (blood) from a peanut-allergic patient. Serum was positive for fenugreek. Two grains of fenugreek on the patient's lip caused an immediate reaction.

In our view, these findings have implications for anyone with peanut allergy who has an allergic reaction to a curry. Most of these reactions may indeed be caused by peanut, but there may be cases where the culprit ingredient is in fact fenugreek. All allergic reactions should be investigated so that the true cause is identified.

Some people with fenugreek allergy may react to other legumes (such as chick peas, soya, lentils or lupin), although we know of no published evidence to support this.

Feedback

Please help us to improve our information resources by sending us your feedback at: -

<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/information-resources-feedback/>

Sources

All the information we produce is evidence based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you wish to know the sources we used in producing any of our information products, please contact info@anaphylaxis.org.uk and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

The content of this article has been peer-reviewed by Professor John Warner, Professor of Paediatrics and Head of Department, Imperial College.

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to the review of this article.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this article is given in good faith. Every effort is taken to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

About Anaphylaxis UK [Geomanist, 12, Left]

Anaphylaxis UK is the only UK-wide charity solely focused on supporting people at risk of serious, life-threatening allergic reactions. We provide information and support to people living with allergies through our free national helpline and local support groups. We also campaign and fundraise to achieve our ultimate aim, to create a safer environment for all people at risk of serious allergies. Visit our website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk and follow us to keep up-to-date with our latest news. We're on Facebook @anaphylaxixUK, LinkedIn, Instagram @anaphylaxisUK, Twitter @AnaphylaxisUK and YouTube.