

Shea nuts

Shea nuts are tree nuts used to produce shea nut butter, sometimes known as shea nut oil. This is refined, bleached and deodorized, and used primarily in confectionery products such as chocolate. Shea nut butter is also used in some cosmetics where the primary exposure would be skin contact. The nut itself is not eaten in most countries.

Scientific investigations have found that refined shea nut butter does not pose any known or likely allergy risk to consumers, including those with peanut or tree nut allergies.

The US-based Food Allergy Research and Resource Programme (FARRP) conducted a thorough search of the medical literature and stated in August 2016 that that no cases of allergy to shea nut or shea nut butter had ever been reported in the medical literature.

FARRP's own research indicates that refined shea nut butter does not contain any detectable protein residues. It is the protein in a food that causes allergic reactions. Although another US team found some protein content in shea nut butter, this was minimal. The conclusion would seem to be that any allergy risk from refined shea nut butter is remote, although no one can say the risk is zero. There could be someone, somewhere who will react.

A totally separate issue is whether shea nut butter coming into contact with broken skin could conceivably be a route of sensitisation (the process in which someone becomes allergic to something in the first place). This is a different question and one that can only be answered by research. Certainly there have been suggestions in the medical literature that sensitization to peanut protein may occur in children through the application of peanut oil to inflamed skin. Theoretically this could happen with other oils, although we know of no research that would quantify any possible risk.

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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 knowledgebase article has been Peer Reviewed by Dr Michael Radcliffe, Consultant in Allergy Medicine, University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust; and Prof Stephen Taylor, director of the US-based Food Allergy Research and Resource Programme (FARRP).

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to his 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

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.