



Registered Dietitians
Department of
Veterans Affairs
Leading the way to better health

Food Allergy and Intolerance

Reactions to food can be caused by a food allergy or a food intolerance. Many people think these two are the same, but they are not.

What is a Food Allergy?

- A food allergy is an immune system response that occurs when the body reacts to a food as if that food is not safe. The body creates a defense system to fight against the “invader.” Some food allergy reactions can be fatal.
- Although any food may cause an allergic reaction, the following eight foods account for 90 percent of food allergies:
 - ✓ Eggs
 - ✓ Fish
 - ✓ Milk
 - ✓ Peanuts
 - ✓ Shellfish
 - ✓ Soy
 - ✓ Tree nuts (e.g., almonds, pecans, walnuts)
 - ✓ Wheat

What are the signs of a food allergy?

- Nausea or vomiting
- Rash or hives
- Stomach pain
- Diarrhea
- Tingling feeling
- Swelling of tongue or throat
- Wheezing, being unable to breathe
- Drop in blood pressure
- Passing out



Symptoms can range from mild to severe and can appear within minutes or hours after eating. A severe reaction is called anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis can be deadly and requires urgent medical care.

How do I know if I have a food allergy?

If you think you have a food allergy, it is important to see your doctor or allergist. They might perform skin prick tests on your back or forearm or blood tests to check for reactions to certain foods. It can be helpful to keep a food and symptom journal and take it with you when you see your doctor.

What is the treatment for a food allergy?

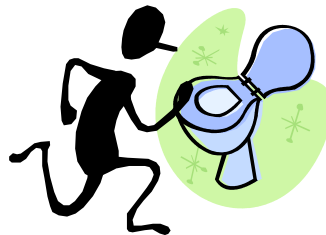
A diet free of the allergy-causing food is the only way to prevent a reaction. Because a reaction can be triggered by eating just a small amount of the food, it is important to learn how to read a food label.

What is a Food Intolerance?

- Food intolerance is a digestive system response rather than an immune response. It occurs when a person is not able to digest a certain food or food additive.

What are the signs of a food intolerance?

- Nausea
- Stomach pain
- Gas, cramps, bloating
- Vomiting
- Heartburn
- Diarrhea
- Headache
- Irritability or nervousness



How do I know if I have a food intolerance?

There is no test for most food intolerances. Keeping a food journal can help you learn which food or foods cause problems. One way to identify problem foods is to cut out all suspect foods from your diet until the symptoms are gone and then add them back one at a time to see if they cause symptoms.

What is the treatment for a food intolerance?

Food intolerance is often dose-related. People may not have symptoms unless they eat a large portion of the food or eat it often. For example, someone with lactose intolerance may be able to have some milk on cereal but not drink a large glass of milk. Simply eating less of a food, or having it less often, may reduce symptoms of food intolerance.

Contact your local VA Dietitian for more information.