

# Food Allergy

## What is a food allergy?

A true food allergy occurs when there is an abnormal reaction by the immune system to one or more food protein. This type of reaction results in the formation of antibodies which can trigger immediate symptoms such as hives, swelling of the lips, eyes or face, vomiting or diarrhoea, difficulty breathing, collapsing or anaphylaxis. Total avoidance of the problem food is the only solution.

Food allergy is most commonly seen in early childhood, occurring in around 1 in 20 children. Food allergy is usually “outgrown” during childhood except for allergy to nuts, seeds and seafood. The incidence of food allergy in adults is around 1 in 100.

## What is food intolerance?

Food intolerance is different from a food allergy, and does not involve the immune system. It occurs when a person has an enzyme deficiency (such as in lactose intolerance) or a reaction to either natural or artificial substances in foods.

## The difference between food allergy and food intolerance.

Food issue	Cause of issue	Required action
Food allergy	Abnormal immune system reaction	Must avoid that food completely
Food intolerance	Non immune system reactions eg. enzyme deficiency or reaction to natural or added food components	Total avoidance is not necessary but some dietary adjustment will be required

## Which foods are most likely to cause allergies?

The vast majority of allergic reactions to food are caused by a small number of foods, for example, eggs, wheat, fish, peanuts and other nuts, milk and soy. The most common food allergy in children is to eggs, peanuts, fish, wheat, soy and milk, while adults are more likely to be allergic to fish, shellfish, peanuts and other nuts.

## What causes cows’ milk allergy?

People who are allergic to cows’ milk react to the protein components of the milk.

## How common is cows’ milk allergy?

In Australia, the true prevalence of cows’ milk allergy is hard to ascertain. It is believed that only 2% of children under 2 years of age are truly allergic to cows’ milk, and in adults, cows’ milk allergy is much rarer. It is also extremely uncommon for cows’ milk allergy to cause asthma. Diagnosing true milk allergy is difficult and can easily be misdiagnosed. A medical doctor should always be consulted if you suspect that you or anyone in your family may have an allergy.

Fortunately, most children grow out of cows’ milk allergy by the age of about three years. It is extremely rare to develop a true cows’ milk allergy as an adult.

## What is the treatment for cows’ milk allergy?

Once an allergy has been diagnosed conclusively, the offending food or foods should be eliminated from the diet. Even trace amounts can cause severe symptoms, so if cows’ milk is the problem check the labels on all manufactured foods, including foods such as biscuits and cakes. Avoid all foods that contain cows’ milk or cows’ milk products, including cheese, yogurt, ice cream, ghee, lactose and ingredients such as milk powder, milk solids, casein and whey.

Some milk products claim to be suitable for people with milk allergy, for example ‘A2 milk’ and goats’ milk. However ‘A2 milk’ is not suitable for cows’ milk allergic individuals and most people who are allergic to cows’ milk will also be allergic to goats’ milk.

If there is no improvement after the removal of all dairy products, other causes of the symptoms should be investigated by your doctor. Make a record of symptoms and all foods and drinks that have been consumed. These notes could assist the doctor in diagnosis.



### **Can cows' milk allergy be prevented or delayed?**

If your family has a background of allergic disorders, the following general measures are considered to be good practice for minimising the risk of allergy:

- Encourage breast feeding
- Introduce solid foods at about 6 months, rather than any earlier, and start with foods such as rice cereal, pears and pumpkin which are unlikely to be allergenic
- Cows' milk can be introduced as a main drink in the diet after 12 months of age

### **For how long should a food be eliminated?**

As food allergy is often out-grown in the first 5 years of life, it is important to review whether the food allergy is still present on a regular basis. This can be done by repeat allergy testing. Reintroduction of an eliminated food must be done extremely cautiously, **ONLY** under strict medical supervision. As milk allergy is usually out-grown it can often be successfully reintroduced under medical supervision.

### **What are the dangers of unnecessarily removing cows' milk from the diet?**

Cows' milk provides a unique package of more than 10 essential nutrients including:

- protein
- carbohydrate
- vitamins (A, B12, and riboflavin)
- minerals (calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium and zinc)

Eliminating milk and other dairy products from the diet can result in inadequate nutrition, unless an appropriate selection of substitute foods is eaten. Dairy foods are the richest source of calcium in the Australian diet. Three serves\* of dairy everyday provide the recommended dietary intake of calcium as part of their unique nutrient package.

\*3 serves of dairy provide approximately 100% of the average recommended dietary intake for calcium. 3 serves is equal to a glass of milk (250ml), a tub of yogurt (200g) and a piece of cheese (40g).

Food Allergy



We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy Inc. in the preparation of this brochure ([www.allergy.org.au](http://www.allergy.org.au)).

The information provided in this document is to be used as **nutrition education information** only. All material is published with due care and attention, and in good faith but no responsibility can be accepted for omissions, typographical or printing errors, or situation changes that have taken place after publication. For further information on any of our resources, visit [www.dairyaustralia.com.au/nutrition](http://www.dairyaustralia.com.au/nutrition) or call our consumer line on 1800 817 736. This brochure may be photocopied for non-profit or non-commercial applications. Dairy Australia, ABN 60 105 227 987, Level 5 IBM Tower, 60 City Rd, Southbank Victoria 3006 Australia ©Dairy Australia February 2005. GHT03