

Food Allergy



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Expert interviewed: ⬆

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their food allergies but there are
some allergies that stay for life.*



In Singapore, it is estimated that between 4 to 5 per cent of school-going children have a food allergy, while adults are affected less frequently.

Food allergy is an abnormal response to a food protein triggered by our body's immune system. Common food allergic symptoms include urticaria or hive-like rashes, eye or lip swellings, vomiting, and/or wheezing. There are people who may suffer from such symptoms but they are not caused by food allergy. Therefore, a careful food history and ensuing adverse reactions are important in making the diagnosis of food allergy.

Most people with food allergy are only allergic to one food protein, for instance, those who are allergic to eggs are not allergic to chicken. “Only a minority is allergic to multiple proteins,” said Dr Liew Woei Kang, paediatric immunology and allergy consultant, KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

According to Dr Liew, studies have shown that young children below the age of two are usually allergic to eggs, milk, soy bean, fish and wheat, while older children are mostly allergic to seafood and peanuts. Some food allergens tend to cause more severe reactions, for example peanut, seafood and bird's nest.

Life- threatening reactions

Fortunately, most people with food allergy experience relatively mild symptoms such as skin rashes, perioral rash or itch, and swelling of the mouth or eyes.

However, some people may develop severe allergic reactions known as anaphylaxis. They may have breathing difficulties, wheezing or drop in blood pressure - which can be life-threatening.



Dr Liew cautioned: "It may be a mild case of allergy this time round, but the next time it happens, the reaction may be more severe."

He encourages parents to learn to read food labels and look out for potential food allergens. For instance, if a child is allergic to eggs, he not only has to avoid eggs but also substances which refer to the protein in eggs such as albumin, meringue, nougat and ovalbumin.

As there is currently no cure for food allergies, the only way is to identify the allergens and avoid them. If a patient has a previous severe allergic reaction to the food allergen, he would have to strictly eliminate the food protein as well as by-products from the diet.

In recent years, some doctors have moved away from a strict avoidance diet especially for lower risk food allergy

patients. It is common for an egg allergic patient to experience gradual tolerance of egg by-products, and if indeed so, only whole eggs need to be avoided.

Outgrowing allergies

Food immunotherapy is currently being explored in some countries as a cure for food allergy, but not used in routine practice yet. This involves a controlled introduction of increasing food allergen to train the immune system to be less allergic.

Dr Liew reassured that most children "outgrow" their food allergies as they become older. For example, 50 per cent of those who are allergic to milk and eggs outgrow their allergy by the age of three, and 90 per cent of them by the time they are 10 years old. However, 80 per cent of those who are allergic to peanuts, tree nuts and seafood – the allergies stay with them for life.

Timely reintroduction of the food when the child is tolerant is just as important as avoidance when the child is allergic. Whilst Dr Liew often comes across parents who give their child a food "test" periodically at home to check if they are still allergic. He advises against this.

"Premature introduction can provoke a reaction and possibly stimulate the immune memory further, whilst a delay can result in food aversion in the child. There are simple allergy test available like the skin prick test, which can assist the doctor to predict if the patient is still allergic before reintroducing the food," said Dr Liew.