

# Was it something you ate?

Getting to the bottom of food allergies and other sensitivities.

**L**iving with a food allergy or intolerance can be a huge hassle. So it's surprising to find out how many people think they have sensitivities to certain foods—and alter their lives accordingly—when they really don't.

"Research shows that as many as 20 percent of people claim to have food allergies when the number is actually around 3 to 4 percent," says Hugh Sampson, M.D., director of the Jaffe Food Allergy Institute at the Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York. He concedes that the number of people with milder reactions—nonallergic symptoms that flare up when they eat certain foods—is higher, but thinks it's still generally overestimated. That's partly because reactions to food can change over time. And various symptoms are sometimes mistakenly attributed to food when they really stem from something else.

On the other hand, some very real and potentially life-threatening food allergies appear to be on the rise. For

example, a 2010 report comparing surveys of U.S. households in 1997, 2002, and 2008 found a steady increase in allergies to peanuts and tree nuts in children. The reasons for the trend aren't clear. But peanut butter, once a staple in schools, is now banned from some of them, along with other nuts.

## ALLERGY OR INTOLERANCE?

**Food intolerances** occur in the digestive system, where, due to various possible reasons, the body is unable to properly break down certain foods. That causes such symptoms as gas, bloating, and diarrhea. Some of the more common culprits are sugars—specifically lactose, found in dairy products, and fructose, found in fruit, honey, and some vegetables. Fructose is also used as a sweetener in some soft drinks and fruit drinks.

But not all intolerances cause digestive symptoms. For example, cheese, chocolate, and wine can trigger migraine headaches in some people.

**A food allergy** is an abnormal response to food triggered by the immune system. Within minutes to hours of coming in contact with even a trace amount of something they're allergic to, people might experience symptoms in their gastrointestinal tract (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea); on their skin (itching, swelling, hives); and in their respiratory system (congested, runny, or itchy nose; sneezing, coughing, or wheezing). In some cases, an allergen—most often nuts—can trigger anaphylaxis, a severe reaction that happens quickly and can include swelling of the throat, difficulty breathing, dizziness, and loss of consciousness. Without immediate treatment—an injection of epinephrine (adrenaline) and medical attention—it can be fatal.

People frequently confuse allergies with food intolerance, which is a dangerous mistake, says Maria Acebal, CEO of the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network, a nonprofit advocacy and research group. While people with an



## 5 surprising facts about food allergies

**1** There's no such thing as "a little" allergic. A mild reaction one time doesn't mean the next one won't be severe. One review of fatalities linked to allergies found that most of the victims had not experienced a severe reaction until the one that caused their death.

**2** Anything that has touched an allergen can be dangerous. Trace levels of allergens can be spread by kitchen utensils and factory equipment. Washing surfaces with soap and water effectively removes allergens such as peanut protein; alcohol sanitizers don't.

**3** Kissing can cause a reaction. You should wait at least 4 hours before kissing someone who has eaten a food you're allergic to, say researchers at the Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York City. And make sure the person eats something else in the interim.

**4** Allergic reactions can occur in phases. Even a health-care professional might not realize that a patient can get better and then relapse minutes or hours later, experts warn. People who have had a reaction should remain under observation for at least 4 hours.

**5** It might take two epinephrine self-injectors (like an EpiPen) to quell a serious reaction. Once you take the first dose, get medical attention right away in case another shot is needed. It's also smart to carry an extra one if going somewhere remote.

