

FOOD INTOLERANCE

What is food intolerance?

Food intolerance is a disorder in which contact with a food – or absorption of it – makes a person unwell. Many people, perhaps 2-3% of the population in this country, find that a particular food can give them unpleasant symptoms. Without ever seeing a doctor, they may find that they can avoid the symptoms by avoiding the food.

What are the symptoms and how are they caused?

Symptoms of food intolerance can range from skin reactions to swelling of lips, mouth or throat, and from breathing difficulties to vomiting or diarrhoea. In a few cases – especially in the type of food intolerance known as *food allergy* – symptoms can be very severe or even life threatening.

Food Intolerance

This is a recurring adverse reaction to a specific food (or foods), which occurs even when the food is given in a disguised form. One example of a food intolerance is 'lactose intolerance'. In this case lactose sugar, which is present in cow's milk, cannot be digested and passes on through the bowel until it is fermented in the colon, where it can cause bloating, discomfort and diarrhoea. Another example is intolerance to a protein in cereals called gluten (Coeliac Disease), which impairs the intestine's ability to absorb nutrients from food.

In some instances it is difficult to pinpoint the reason for symptoms. Some people, for a variety of reasons, are intolerant to fatty foods and others are convinced that certain 'indigestible' foods give them griping pains, bloating and bowel disturbances. However, tolerance may vary from day to day and symptoms may only appear when substantial amounts of the food are eaten.

Food Allergy

This is a relatively rare form of food intolerance in which the body's immune system produces a highly exaggerated response to something which is essentially harmless. This often involves the production of antibodies known as Immunoglobulin E (IgE). The body reacts to a certain food to which it has become sensitive and tries to destroy it. This can cause swelling or inflammation, and if the food has been absorbed and dispersed throughout the body, the reaction can be widespread.

Food Aversion

This means the dislike of or an emotional response to a particular food which may be associated with a traumatic or difficult situation. In this case, symptoms do not occur when the food is given in a disguised form.

Diagnosis of Food Intolerance

Many people, who have had a bad experience with a particular food, make a personal decision not to eat that food. As long as it is not an important source of nutrition this can do no harm, even if the diagnosis is wrong. However, an incorrect self-diagnosis without professional guidance can sometimes lead to a seriously restricted diet, causing nutritional deficiencies and yet the problem remains unsolved.

The diagnosis of food intolerance can be established if the symptoms go away during an 'elimination diet' and then return when the suspect food is re-introduced. An elimination diet will normally be very restrictive and may contain just a few basic foods which are not thought to cause food intolerance. This should only be conducted under the supervision of a dietitian, after referral from a

GP or gastroenterologist. Once the problem food or foods are identified they may be given again after an interval to see if symptoms recur.

Ideally the food (in a disguised form) and a placebo (a harmless substance) are given on different occasions. If the patient develops symptoms to the food but not the placebo, then the diagnosis of food intolerance is confirmed. This is known as a 'blind' challenge test. These tests may not always be reliable, however, particularly when the symptoms affect stomach or bowel function. In this situation, the response may only occur with large quantities of food or when the challenge test is repeated on more than one occasion. A convincing 'blind' test may then be difficult or impossible and could cause confusion.

There has been a lot of discussion on whether Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) could be linked to food intolerance. In some people with IBS, symptoms can be affected by dietary adjustments which increase or decrease the passage of food residues to the lower bowel. Bread and cereals can sometimes cause attacks, but whether intolerance to specific foods is ever the sole cause of Irritable Bowel Syndrome is still the subject of controversy. (For further information on IBS see our leaflet on 'Irritable Bowel Syndrome')

There has been an increase in recent years in the number of tests (blood tests, or skin tests) for food intolerance offered by a variety of different therapists. The accuracy and efficiency of these tests are not well established and they may not result in a correct diagnosis.

What treatment is available?

If food intolerance is proved, avoidance of the food is the mainstay of treatment. Intestinal symptoms that are clearly food related, but which are mild and prevented by avoiding a single food, may not need the attention of a doctor. However, this depends on the food in question. If it is an important source of nutrition (e.g. milk), avoiding it may make the diet unbalanced unless replaced with appropriate alternatives. When more than one food is implicated, a restricted diet may be required, under professional supervision. Avoidance of major food groups, such as dairy products, cereals, fruit or vegetables; or the use of an exclusion diet should not be attempted without monitoring and support from a dietitian or a gastroenterologist.

Other factors should also be taken into consideration when treating suspected food intolerance. It is common knowledge that emotions can affect the bowel, and it is important to make sure that, if stress is a factor, its possible influence is recognised. An understanding of the contributory effects of drinking too much tea, coffee, or alcohol may also help in the control of symptoms.

If intestinal symptoms also coincide with swelling of the lips, mouth or throat, allergic symptoms in the skin, or wheezing, referral via your GP to an allergy specialist and dietitian is advisable as these allergies may be more dangerous.

It is important to enjoy food and to maintain a normal, varied diet where possible, without restricting foods unnecessarily. Despite the growing interest in food intolerance, symptoms are often not related to diet, particularly in Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and may eventually subside. If food intolerance is suspected, it is important to seek medical advice rather than treating yourself.

Core is the working name for the Digestive Disorders Foundation

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Registered Charity No 262762