

Fast Facts: Food Allergies in Canada

- Food allergy is a growing public health issue in Canada.
- There is no cure; avoidance of allergenic food(s) is the only way to prevent an allergic reaction.
- Approximately 2.5 million Canadians self-report having at least one food allergy.*
- The incidence is highest among young children (under 3 years of age) with close to 6-8% affected by food allergy**.
- Peanut allergy in Canada affects about 2 in 100 children.
- About 300,000 Canadian children under 18 years have food allergies.
- One in two Canadians know someone with a serious food allergy.
- More than 40% of Canadians read food labels looking for allergen information.

**Overall Prevalence of Self-reported Food Allergy in Canada, L. Soller et al, Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology February 2012 (Abstract)*

***A population-based study on peanut, tree nut, fish, shellfish, and sesame allergy prevalence in Canada. Moshe Ben-Shoshan, MD, et al, Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, February 2010*

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis (pronounced anna-fill-axis) is a serious allergic reaction that is rapid in onset and may cause death. Individuals with food allergies at risk of anaphylaxis carry an epinephrine auto-injector (such as EpiPen[®] or Allerject[®]), which contains life-saving medication in case of an allergic reaction.

2. What are the signs of an anaphylactic reaction?

An anaphylactic reaction can involve any of the following symptoms, which may appear alone or in any combination, regardless of the triggering allergen:

- **Skin system:** hives, swelling (face, lips, tongue), itching, warmth, redness, rash

- **Respiratory system (breathing):** coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, chest pain/tightness, throat tightness, hoarse voice, nasal congestion or hay fever-like symptoms (runny, itchy nose and watery eyes, sneezing), trouble swallowing
- **Gastrointestinal system (stomach):** nausea, pain/cramps, vomiting, diarrhea
- **Cardiovascular system (heart):** pale/blue colour, weak pulse, passing out, dizzy/lightheaded, shock
- **Other:** anxiety, feeling of “impending doom”, headache, uterine cramps, metallic taste

3. What causes an anaphylactic reaction?

Food is one of the most common causes of anaphylaxis, but insect stings, medications, latex, and exercise can also cause reactions.

4. What are the most common food allergens in Canada?

The Government of Canada recognizes the most common food allergens as: peanuts, tree nuts, seafood (fish, shellfish, crustaceans), egg, milk, sesame, soy, mustard, and wheat. Sulphite, an additive, is also recognized by the Government of Canada. A person can be allergic to any food, but since these are the most common, the government deems them “priority” allergens for labelling purposes.

5. How much of a food allergen does it take to cause a reaction?

Even a very small amount ‘hidden’ in a food or a trace amount of an allergen transferred to a serving utensil has the potential to cause a severe allergic reaction.

6. Can someone have a reaction without ingesting their allergen?

Inhalation of airborne peanut protein can cause allergic reactions, though usually not systemic anaphylaxis. Steam from fish, while cooking, has been shown to cause severe reactions in some people. Direct ingestion of an allergy-causing food poses the greatest risk for most people with food allergies. The odour alone has not been known to cause an anaphylactic reaction as the smell does not contain the protein.

7. Can someone who is allergic to a food have an allergic reaction after kissing someone who has eaten that food?

Yes. People at risk need to tell their friends and partners about their food allergies to avoid accidental exposure, as small amounts of food can be transferred from one person to another through kissing.

8. How are allergic reactions avoided?

Reading ingredient labels on foods, taking special precautions in food preparation and ensuring proper hand washing and cleaning go a long way toward reducing the risk of an accidental exposure.

9. How are allergic reactions treated?

An allergic reaction can usually be treated effectively with a prompt injection of epinephrine/adrenaline (e.g., EpiPen[®] or Allerject[®]). Other medications, such as antihistamines are *not* useful in treating anaphylaxis. After injecting epinephrine, the person is normally taken to hospital for observation and/or further treatment.

10. Why do so many people seem to have food allergies these days?

No one really knows why food allergies are on the rise, but they are. One theory, known as the “hygiene hypothesis”, suggests that people living in western countries are living in cleaner and more sanitized environments. The immune system – exposed to fewer germs than our bodies are used to dealing with- mistakenly identifies certain foods as harmful. Genetics also play a role in the development of food allergies; for example, if one parent has allergies, their child has a greater risk of developing allergies as well. Much research is being done into the cause, and the potential treatment, of food allergies.