

Forbidden foods?

... someone who has a food allergy—pals who burst into welts at the sight of a shrimp, family members who bloat up if one drop of dairy sneaks into their dinners or kids who carry EpiPens in case they come in contact with a peanut. But there's another kind of food reaction some experts say is running rampant and radically underdiagnosed. Widely known as "food sensitivities," these reactions are much less violent and dangerous—though potentially more insidious.

"Food sensitivities are estimated to affect 35 to 45 percent of individuals," says Beth Reardon, R.D., director of integrative nutrition at Duke Integrative Medicine in Durham, N.C. "But people often don't know they have one." What they do know is that they are grappling with any number of physical symptoms—fatigue, headaches, weight gain, digestive issues—and traditional treatments aren't helping them feel better. »

Allergy vs. sensitivity

It's estimated that 12 million Americans are suffering from diagnosed food allergies—and 90 percent of them are caused by these eight foods: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, wheat, soy, fish and shellfish. If you're one of these people, you probably know it, says Steven Lamm, M.D., a New York internist.

"When you say 'allergy' to a Western doctor, that denotes a very specific thing—an immediate and violent response by the body mediated by immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies," he explains. "IgE triggers a cascade of events that are hard to confuse: hives, wheezing, swelling, vomiting, even anaphylactic shock. The symptoms are very serious—and potentially deadly." When you have these kinds of pronounced food allergies, there is only one cure: Avoid the trigger food at all costs.

Much more common, but harder to diagnose, are food sensitivities. Mediated by another kind of

antibody, immunoglobulin G (IgG), the body's response to a food sensitivity is slower and milder—though no less harmful to long-term health, says Steve Nenner, N.M.D., N.D., C.D.N., a naturopathic medical doctor with practices in Phoenix, New York City and San Francisco. "With IgG, you might experience the detrimental effects four or six days later," he says. "That means something you ate last Thursday might be causing headaches or reflux on Monday. It can be very difficult to make the connections between specific foods and your symptoms."

But it's worth making an effort to find out, especially if you're suffering from any chronic disease—one with no definitive answers from Western

medicine, such as fibromyalgia, fatigue, arthritis, gastroesophageal reflux (GERD), irritable bowel syndrome, migraines, sinus congestion, depression, unexplained rashes or signs of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). All of

these conditions—and many others—have been associated with food sensitivity, says **Jacob Teitelbaum, M.D., author of *From Fatigued to Fantastic*** (Avery Trade) and medical director of the Dallas-based Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers Inc. "If you've been to four doctors, and nobody seems to be able to help you, you need to consider looking into food sensitivities," he says.

Why gut health matters

An IgG reaction, though it may be barely noticeable, is still a reaction—meaning your body treats the offending food as a hostile invader, and unleashes an immune response to deal with it. "In order for food to be properly digested, it has to be completely broken down and absorbed in the intestine," explains Susan Engel, M.O.E., R.D., L.D., founder of Nutrition Matters in Exeter, N.H. "But if there's an imbalance of good and bad bacteria in the gut or a state of long-term inflammation due to a food sensitivity, you can develop leaky gut syndrome."

Think of your intestinal walls as a kind of armor, a defense mechanism composed of densely packed cells that keep food contained. When an allergen is detected, though, the body overrides that basic function to allow immune cells into the intestines. The result is leaky gut syndrome, a condition in which the intestinal walls fail to do their job as barriers and let undigested food molecules



get into the bloodstream. "When the body perceives something it sees as a threat in the digestive tract, it opens up the tight junctions in the intestines to allow immune cells in," says Nenner. "The irony is that it also allows food molecules out into the bloodstream—which will exacerbate the food sensitivity. Since the digestive tract is so closely linked to the neurological system, and because it has so many blood vessels running through it, you can literally get symptoms anywhere else in the body." Hence, the mysterious headache or baseless anxiety attack.

Youth tends to mask the symptoms, which can go on for years without causing trouble, Nenner says. But the effects of long-term inflammation caused by a food sensitivity will invariably start to show in middle age—and are likely to only get worse if you're taking medications such as acid reducers or pain pills to mask the symptoms without grappling with the underlying cause.

Pinpoint the problem

So how do you know if you're sensitive to certain foods? One way is to get tested for an IgG reaction—a simple pinprick can yield enough blood to test for antibodies to 96 different foods. With IgG results, you know exactly what your problem is (or isn't), says Nenner. His own family history turned Nenner toward food allergy and sensitivity work early in his practice. "My mother was diagnosed with very high blood pressure, which came on suddenly and would not respond to medication," he says. "I tried every trick in my naturopathic toolbox to help her—herbs, homeopathy, acupuncture, nutritional supplements. Nothing worked." Until, Nenner says, he did a simple IgG test—which revealed that his mother was highly reactive to eggs. "I took eggs out of her diet, and within two weeks her

blood pressure went down and stayed down," he says. In fact, Nenner feels so strongly about the test that he offers it to anyone and everyone, patient or not, through his Arizona practice (you can order it online for \$295 at stevenenner.com).

But IgG testing is not without controversy. A 1998 study from Bastyr University in Seattle found the efficacy of the test mixed, at best. If IgG testing feels like a roll of the dice—or if you don't have access to an integrative practitioner to help you make sense of your situation—you can take matters into your own hand by experimenting with your diet yourself, says Reardon. "Keeping a food journal is one way to connect the dots," she says. "If you're feeling bad on one day, you can flip back and see what you've been eating that might be causing your problems. You can look for patterns over time." A food elimination diet can also be an effective tool (see "Process of Elimination," pg. 44).

Finding a solution

Once you have identified a culprit, the question is: What should you do about it? Avoidance is the most effective approach, and the one Nenner recommends most, especially if your sensitivity is to eggs, dairy or gluten. Nenner says he thinks these three foods are the cause of most problematic sensitivities, and that ongoing exposure to them may kick off other sensitivities by causing leaky gut.

Still, cutting out dairy, eggs and gluten can be a painful process—especially since they are so pervasive in our culture. Doing so unnecessarily can also remove needed nutrients from your diet, says Ruth Frechman, M.A., R.D., spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "Yes, there are intractable food allergies, but you should be able to resolve sensitivities," she says. "We were designed to be omnivores—our

bodies should be able to handle all foods. And the truth is we need these foods to get the nutrition we need."

If you discover a food sensitivity—yet want to keep everything on the menu—try these strategies:

Eat a variety of whole foods

"When we eat too many packaged foods, we get overexposed to wheat, soy, dairy and corn," says Reardon. »

Choose foods without labels and increase the variety of whole foods, including fruits, grains, vegetables and protein sources, and you'll naturally decrease your reactivity—and over time, your sensitivity.

Pump up the probiotics If you have a longstanding sensitivity, a good first step is to re-establish the proper balance of healthful bacteria in your intestines. Try a broad-spectrum probiotic for best effect.

Explore enzymes Another byproduct of our fast food nation is that the pool of natural enzymes in our food has decreased, says Teitelbaum. "When we don't have proper enzymes to digest our food, we end up with partially digested food fragments in our bloodstream that look like invaders to the body—and trigger food sensitivity," he says. Restore your natural enzyme reserves with a plant-based digestive enzyme supplement taken with each meal. We like Enzymedica's Digest Gold (\$28 for 45 capsules; enzymedica.com).

Detox Sometimes, sensitivities are a result of toxicity in the gut, says John Douillard, D.C., an Ayurvedic practitioner based in Boulder, Colo. "We blame milk, or eggs or gluten—but real the problem is that our digestive strength is compromised," he says. The solution? A detox. Check out naturalhealthmag.com/detox for information on how to cleanse safely.

Knock it out with NAET Teitelbaum is a believer in this desensitization technique (shorthand for Nambudripad's Allergy Elimination Technique), which involves a combination of chiropractic manipulation, acupuncture, muscle testing and energy medicine. To find a practitioner near you, visit naet.com.

Supplement yourself Food sensitivities can cause inflammation, which then causes the body to hold on to water—which can cause weight gain and high blood pressure, says Elson M. Haas, M.D., author of *The False Fat Diet* (Ballantine Books). He recommends vitamin C and quercetin to reduce reactivity to foods. "Vitamin C will help reduce allergic-type reactions and eliminate excess fluid," he says. "Quercetin will reduce allergy reactions and inflammation, and help heal the gut lining." Take 500 milligrams of vitamin C and 300 milligrams of quercetin three times a day. ✕



Process of elimination,

To learn whether certain foods are causing your symptoms, you can try a two-week elimination diet. It's simple:

eat clean for seven days, avoiding wheat, citrus fruits, processed meats, dairy, corn, cocoa, bread, eggs, peanuts, sugars, artificial food colorings and

preservatives. On the eighth day, begin to reintroduce the foods one at a time, this way:
Day 8: Add milk
Day 9: Add wheat
Day 10: Add sugar

Day 11: Add egg
Day 12: Add cocoa
Day 13: Add food coloring
Day 14: Add corn
Day 15: Add preservatives
Day 16: Add citrus
Day 17: Add

peanuts
Keep a record of what you eat and how you feel throughout the diet—and for a week afterward. Headaches, a stuffy nose

or digestive problems might point to a culprit. Try eliminating that food for a month, then consider reintroducing it slowly.

(Celiac attack)

If you're suffering from ongoing gluten intolerance, your problem might be more than simple sensitivity. Celiac disease (aka celiac sprue) is a disease in which the immune system damages the villi in the small intestine in reaction to gluten, leading to malabsorption of all nutrients. The disease can be genetic or appear suddenly after surgery, childbirth, viral infection or severe emotional stress. Symptoms vary widely, but may include bloating, diarrhea or constipation, weight loss, fatigue, arthritis, canker sores or unexplained anemia. The condition can only be diagnosed through a series of blood tests done in conjunction with a biopsy of the small intestine. If you suspect celiac, talk to your doctor.

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