UNDERSTANDING Food allergy & INTOLERANCE

True food allergy is quite rare and affects approximately 2% of the adult UK population and up to 8% of children whereas as many as 45% of the population suffer from food intolerance. So how do you know the difference?

Food allergy is caused by a rapid immune reaction involving IgE antibodies which trigger a release of histamine in the body. They tend to come on immediately after eating the food or up to 2 hours afterwards and the symptoms are often severe such as:

- Swelling of the skin, mouth or tongue
- Asthma
- Vomiting
- Urticaria

Peanut or seafood allergies are examples of this type of reaction. Sometimes true food allergy can be life threatening and it can be triggered by even a tiny amount of the offending food or drink. Other common allergenic foods include egg, yeast and seafood.

Food intolerances are more insidious as they come on between 4 and 72 hours after consuming the food or drink which can make it extremely difficult to identify them without testing. They are caused by IgG antibodies produced by the immune system binding to the antigen (food particle). These immune complexes are deposited in a variety of tissues around the body resulting in a diverse range of symptoms including:

- **Gastrointestinal:** IBS, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, constipation, bloating, flatulence
- **Skin:** Eczema, psoriasis, urticaria
- **Nervous system:** Headache, migraine, hyperactivity (ADHD)
- **Musculoskeletal:** Joint pain, arthritis, muscle pain, fibromyalgia
- **Psychiatric:** Chronic fatigue, insomnia, anxiety, depression
- **Respiratory:** Asthma, rhinitis, sinusitis, persistent cough, catarrh
- **Cardiovascular:** Heart palpitations
- **Metabolic:** Weight gain

Many foods can cause food intolerances, however, the ones that I come across most frequently in practice are gluten, dairy, yeast and eggs.

Other components of food and drink can also cause intolerances which do not involve IgE or IgG antibodies:

HISTAMINE INTOLERANCE

Histamine is a chemical which occurs naturally in certain foods. It is stored in our bodies in mast cells and when it is released it can cause allergic-like symptoms. The enzyme diamine oxidase (DAO) breaks down any histamine that we absorb from our diet, so when we consume food or drink which contains histamine it does not affect us. However, some people have a low level of this enzyme so when they have a histamine rich diet they may suffer from symptoms such as:

- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Arrhythmia (altered heart rate)
- Asthma
- Diarrhoea
- Dysmenorrhoea (painful periods)
- Eczema
- Headaches
- Nausea, vomiting
- Rhinitis
- Skin rashes, itching and flushing
- Sneezing
- Swelling
- Urticaria

Food and drinks that are particularly high in histamine include:

- Wine
- Beer
- Cheese, especially fermented cheeses such as Camembert, Brie, Gruyere, Cheddar, Roquefort and Parmesan
- Brewer's yeast
- Pork and beef sausage and ham, especially 'dried' (cured) versions
- Fermented soy products (soy sauce)
- All fermented vegetables such as sauerkraut
- Shellfish
- Most fish, including canned fish
- Spinach

It is also known that some foods such as chocolate, avocado, strawberries, tomatoes and citrus fruits are histamine liberators in the body. They do not contain high levels of histamine but can trigger the release of histamine.

For people with histamine intolerance it is advisable to make sure that the overall histamine content of the diet is kept quite low. For example, having a meal of sausages with spinach washed down by a glass of wine and finished off with cheese would send histamine levels rocketing whereas eating fish without other histamine containing foods on the same day should be better tolerated. It is possible to supplement the enzyme DAO, however, the synthesis of this enzyme can also be supported by vitamin B6 and copper although these nutrients should not be supplemented in isolation without professional guidance for long periods as they can cause other imbalances in the body. Vitamin C is also a really important nutrient as it helps to break down histamine in the body.

LACTOSE INTOLERANCE:

Lactose intolerance is caused by a lack of the digestive enzyme lactase which breaks down the lactose found in milk and other dairy products. The symptoms are:

- Flatulence (wind)
- Diarrhoea
- Bloated stomach
- Stomach cramps

The symptoms usually develop within a few hours of consuming food or drink that contains lactose. People with lactose intolerance need to avoid lactose containing foods. It is also possible to supplement the enzyme lactase in circumstances where avoidance is not possible. There are a variety of lactose dairy products on the market now which contain the enzyme lactase which may be suitable for some people with lactose intolerance.

If you suspect that your child is suffering from lactose intolerance you should consult your GP. More information about lactose intolerance can be found at: **www.nhs.uk/Conditions/lactose-intolerance/Pages/Introduction.aspx**

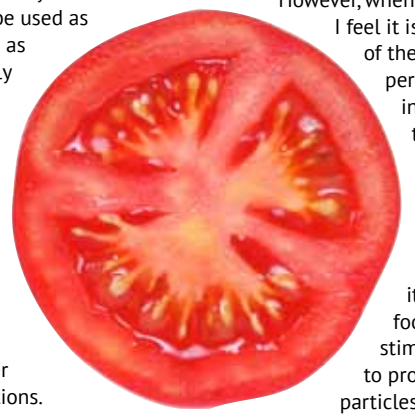
SULPHITE AND SULPHUR DIOXIDE SENSITIVITY:

Sulphites and sulphur dioxide are used as preservatives in many foods and drinks such as dried fruit, sausages, bottled sauces, pickled food and gravies. Sulphites are also found in most wines, as they stop the fermentation process which would otherwise make the wine turn sour.

Sulphites and sulphur dioxide can cause allergy-like symptoms, particularly in people with underlying asthma and allergic rhinitis. The most common reactions are wheezing, tight chest, coughing and urticaria.

NIGHTSHADES:

Some people are sensitive to the nightshade family of plants including white potatoes, peppers, tomatoes and aubergines. Nightshade sensitivity can be particularly problematic for people with arthritis in whom they can cause inflammation. As we are all individual not everyone with arthritis is sensitive to the nightshade family, however, it is worth a nightshade free trial period for anyone with arthritis. Sweet potatoes can be used as a substitute to white potatoes as they are from a different family of plants to the nightshades.



METHODS OF TESTING:

If you think you have a true food allergy you should consult your GP who can arrange for testing. For food intolerance testing I recommend Cambridge Nutritional Sciences, Lorisan and Biolab, each of which offer different testing and price options.

Whilst these tests are an accurate way of measuring for an antibody (immune) reaction, they have their limitations. For example, they wouldn't detect histamine, sulphite or lactose intolerance for which different tests would be needed.

In my practice I often arrange food intolerance testing via one of the labs mentioned above. However, sometimes it is possible to identify a food intolerance by a client's symptoms and diet. This often happens with gluten, yeast and dairy and a trial period without these foods can often bring about an improvement.

HOW TO DEAL WITH FOOD INTOLERANCES:

If you have a true food allergy, unfortunately you need to permanently eliminate the food from your diet as even a tiny amount can trigger symptoms.

Food intolerances are less cut and dry as it depends upon the person. Usually an avoidance period for up to three months is recommended depending upon the severity of the symptoms. Often the food can eventually be reintroduced in small amounts and it is best to rotate it so you only consume it once every four days. Some people also respond well to homeopathic desensitisation.

However, when dealing with food intolerances I feel it is important to view them as part of the bigger picture and look at the person's overall health. If a food intolerance test reveals sensitivity to many different food groups that would be a strong indication that the person may have increased intestinal permeability or "leaky gut". When the lining of the gut is more permeable than it should be it allows molecules of undigested food to enter the blood stream stimulating the immune system to produce antibodies to the food particles which results in multiple food intolerances. In this situation, simply removing the offending foods isn't enough as the lining of the gut needs to be healed. This may involve using supplements such as probiotics, digestive enzymes, L-Glutamine. Zinc, Vitamin A , Vitamin D and collagen powder to name a few.

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