

Asthma & Food

People with asthma do not need a special diet unless there is a proven allergy or food intolerance. The role of diet in asthma control is still unclear. Therefore, changes to diet should only be made with the advice of a doctor or dietician to ensure a healthy well-balanced plan.

Food is rarely a trigger for asthma but may cause severe attacks in a small group of people with food allergy or chemical intolerance.

What is Food Allergy?

A food allergy occurs as a result of an overactive immune system that treats harmless visitors to the body as dangerous invaders. When the body sees particular foods as “invaders” it makes antibodies against them. This sets off a series of reactions that may include:

- Hives
- Rashes
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Tightening and swelling of the airways
- Swelling of the mucous membranes

These reactions may occur very quickly, sometimes only minutes after eating a certain food. The reaction may be so severe that hospitalisation is necessary.

Foods that may trigger an allergic reaction include:

- Peanuts
- Seafood
- Eggs
- Wheat
- Soy
- Dairy foods

True food allergy is more common in young children. In most cases it is linked to other allergic problems such as eczema. Most children outgrow food allergies by the age of five.

What is a Food Chemical Intolerance?

All foods are made up of thousands of chemicals. A small number of these chemicals are known to trigger asthma. The reactions are slow to start and can be delayed as long as three days. Food chemical intolerance is a more common problem than food allergy but symptoms are rarely as severe. Unlike food allergies, food chemical intolerance reactions are “dose dependent”. That means the more food that is eaten, the more severe the reaction. People of all ages may be affected and it can worsen with age.

Food chemicals that may trigger asthma include:

- Sulphites (sulphur dioxide and sodium metabisulphite)
- Food colours (tartrazine)
- Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Salicylates

Sulphites

These are the most common food chemicals to trigger asthma. They are used in many processed foods to stop fermentation. They are also added to some fresh foods such as prawns and grapes. They are numbered 220-228 on labels.

Tartrazine

Tartrazine is an artificial food colouring agent. It rarely triggers asthma but if it does then all food colouring should be avoided. Tartrazine is numbered 102 on labels. Numbers of other food colouring agents are 107, 110, 122-29, 132, 133, 142, 151, 155.

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)

MSG is used to enhance flavour in some foods. It is a food chemical that occurs in high levels in products such as Vegemite and soy sauce. MSG may be added to foods such as savoury flavoured snack foods and some restaurant foods. It appears on food labels as numbers 620-625.

Hydrolysed Vegetable Protein is often used instead of MSG and has much the same effect in those people sensitive to MSG.

Salicylates

These occur naturally in foods. Medicines such as aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (e.g. those used for treating arthritis and other inflammatory conditions) are included in this group. Salicylates are found in all fruit and vegetables so careful testing is recommended to ensure this chemical is a problem before avoiding it.

Dairy Foods

People with asthma are often told to avoid dairy products, particularly milk. Recent research does not support this widely held view. If you think that you may have an allergy to milk products you should seek advice from a dietician and your doctor.

With regard to the role of diet in asthma prevention, to date there is no proof that any food or food group can prevent asthma. If you need personal advice on diet and asthma contact a dietician who specialises in this area. Remember that diet alone will not cure asthma and is not a substitute for good asthma management. However, a healthy diet may help you resist and recover from infections more quickly.

Further Information

More information on allergy and food chemical intolerance may be obtained from the following organisations:

Food Intolerance Network of Australia
Ph: (08) 8981 2099 Fax: (08) 8942 3099
PO Box 85 PARAP NT 0804

Food Anaphylactic Children Training Support
Ph/Fax: (02) 9913 7793
16 Lumeah Ave
ELANORA HEIGHTS NSW 2101

The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research – www.woolcock.org.au

Or The Asthma Foundation of Queensland on 1800 645 130.

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The Asthma Foundation of Queensland – August 2005