Food Allergies

The Issue
Food allergies among Canadians have received a great deal of media attention lately. Most allergic reactions to food are caused by nine categories of foods. Even trace amounts of those foods can cause a severe or life-threatening reaction in some people.

Background
In Canada, there are nine priority food allergens (substances which causes allergies):

- peanuts
- tree nuts (almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts [filberts], macadamia nuts, pecans, pine nuts [pignolias], pistachio nuts, and walnuts)
- sesame seeds
- milk
- eggs
- fish (including shellfish and crustaceans)
- soy
- wheat
- sulphites

Reactions to these allergens among allergic individuals range from mild to severe. Trace amounts of these foods can potentially be found in a wide range of food products including snack foods, health foods, baked goods, seasonings, and many other foods.

Health Risks of Food Allergens

Allergic reactions happen when the body’s immune system reacts to a particular protein or irritant. The reaction may be caused by food, insect stings, and medications.

When someone comes in contact with an allergen, symptoms may develop quickly and have the potential to progress rapidly from a mild reaction to a severe one. The most dangerous of these symptoms include breathing difficulties, a drop in blood pressure, or shock, which may result in loss of consciousness and even death. Severe allergic reactions can occur quickly and without warning. A person experiencing an allergic reaction may have any of the following symptoms:

- Trouble breathing, speaking, or swallowing
• A drop in blood pressure, rapid heart beat, and/or loss of consciousness
• Flushed face, hives or a rash, or red and itchy skin
• Swelling of the eyes, face, lips, throat, and tongue
• Anxiousness, distress, faintness, paleness, sense of doom, and/or weakness
• Cramps, diarrhea, and/or vomiting

There is currently no cure for any food allergy. The only way to prevent a reaction is to totally avoid the specific food. Should a severe reaction occur, the appropriate emergency treatment is an injection of epinephrine (adrenaline). People with known food allergies should carry an auto-injector of epinephrine, which allows them to give themselves an injection of adrenaline.

Adrenaline should be administered as soon as the symptoms of a severe allergic reaction appear. This should be followed up with further treatment and observation in a hospital emergency room.

Severe allergic reactions are not predictable. You may have a mild reaction one time and a severe one the next time, or vice versa.

Minimizing Your Risk

• Know what foods or other factors trigger a reaction and avoid them. When eating out or in a restaurant, tell your host/server about your food allergy, and ask specific questions about the food to be served. Even if a dish does not contain the food you are allergic to, it still might have been in contact with it through utensils and cooking pans. When in doubt, don’t eat it.
• To avoid foods to which you are allergic, learn to read the nutritional/ingredient labels and precautionary labels on foods to prevent contact with even trace amounts of foods you are allergic to. Call food manufacturers if you have doubts about a particular food. Be very careful about bulk foods that may not carry a label or that have cross-contamination.
• If you know you react to a food allergen, always carry an epinephrine auto-injector with you, and know how to use it. If it is your child who is affected, teach them how to use it, and stress the importance of always having it with them. At the cottage or on a trip, be sure to keep one or more epinephrine auto-injectors on hand.
• Use the epinephrine auto-injector at the earliest sign of a reaction. Practice using the epinephrine auto-injector every few months, and train other family members as well.
• Always wear a MedicAlert identifier so that, in case of an accident, others know about your allergies and reactions.
• Children who are subject to severe reactions should be trained to read labels and ask questions before eating foods. Allergy groups such as Anaphylaxis Canada, Allergy Asthma Information Association (AAIA), or Association Québécoise des Allergies alimentaires (AQAA) can help you train and reassure your child. Contact them through their website or at an address given in the Need More Info? Section.
• If you or your child is having a serious allergic reaction, go to your nearest Emergency Department, or dial 911 for instructions.

Government of Canada's Role

The Government of Canada is committed to providing safe food to all Canadians.

Health Canada is responsible for administering the Food and Drugs Act. Health Canada works with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and the medical community to identify foods most commonly involved in allergic reactions.

The CFIA also enforces Canada’s labelling laws and works with associations, distributors, retailers, food manufacturers, and importers to ensure complete and appropriate labelling of all foods. It recommends that food companies establish effective allergen controls to minimize the potential for allergic reactions.

The Food and Drug Regulations require that pre-packaged food be labelled and that ingredients appear in a list in decreasing order of proportion. However, these regulations do not currently require components (i.e. ingredients of ingredients) of certain foods and products, such as flavouring, seasoning, spices and vinegar, to be listed on food labels.

Health Canada is working to amend the Food and Drug Regulations to require that the most common foods and food ingredients, which have the potential to cause life-threatening or severe allergic reactions, be labelled when intentionally added to food.
These changes would also require that the most common of these foods and food ingredients be always identified by their common names, which consumers can easily recognize on food labels.

**Need More Info?**

For additional information on food allergens, go to:
Health Canada, Food Allergies and Intolerences at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodallergies

Health Canada, Food Allergen Labelling at:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/allergen/index-eng.php

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency
Food Allergens Web section at:

Allergy/Asthma Information Association
http://aaia.ca/
Toll-free 1-800-611-7011

Association Québécoise des Allergies alimentaires
www.aqaa.qc.ca/accueil.asp
(French only)

Canadian Society of Allergy and Clinical Immunology
www.csaci.ca/ (English only)

Anaphylaxis Canada
www.anaphylaxis.org/ (English only)
Toll-free: 1-866-785-5660

For more information on severe allergic reactions, consult your doctor or go to:
Health Canada, It’s Your Health, Severe Allergic Reactions at:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/med/allerg-eng.php

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It’s Your Health Web section at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*

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