

PEANUT ALLERGY

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Peanut allergy

Peanut allergy is the most common life-threatening food allergy in children. It is often lifelong. Occasionally it may be outgrown. Children with peanut allergy often cannot stand the smell of peanut butter, may refuse to touch it, and do not want to stay around when peanut butter is being eaten. This type of violent rejection of peanut butter may be the first sign that a child is peanut allergic even if they have never eaten it. Sometimes these children get hives or rash where peanut butter touches the face or skin. If a peanut allergic child touches peanut butter and then rubs the eyes, the eyes may become very swollen and puffy. In the U.S., 8 lb (3 kg) of peanut are consumed per person per year, half as peanut butter, one-third as peanuts, and the rest as peanut oil.

What can happen during an allergic reaction to peanuts?

An allergic reaction to a food usually begins within 2-4 hours and usually lasts less than one day. The more severe the allergy, the smaller the amount required to cause a reaction. Typical immediate allergic reactions to foods include hives or blotching around the mouth, which may spread to the rest of the body, immediate runny nose, sneezing and itchy watery eyes, coughing, choking or gagging, wheezing and trouble breathing, and cramps, vomiting and diarrhea. The allergic reaction can stop at any stage, or may progress to anaphylaxis and death. Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction which involves several parts of the body and can lead to death.

A food does not have to be eaten to cause an allergic reaction but eating it does cause greater amounts to get into the body and usually causes the most severe reactions. Hives can occur on skin contact with allergenic food. If the food goes into the wet surfaces eg through a cut in the skin, or at the lips (eg being kissed by someone who has eaten peanut butter), or in the eye severe

How do I treat an allergic reaction on eating peanut products?

Epinephrine is available in a pre-loaded syringe (**Ana-Kit**; Hollister Stier, Etobikoke ON) or in a spring-loaded, self injectible system (**EpiPen**; Allergex Laboratory Ltd, Kanata, ON). EpiPen is available in two forms, EpiPen Jr. and EpiPen. EpiPen Jr. contains 2.0 ml of epinephrine 1:2000 dilution, and one injection delivers .15mg of epinephrine. Regular EpiPen delivers twice that dose, 3 mg, and is used for children over 15 kg.

Anyone with a peanut allergy should use Epinephrine (**EpiPen**) immediately when they begin to have a reaction to eating peanuts, even if the reaction initially is minor. This is important to prevent anaphylaxis, the most severe form of an allergic reaction. People who delay treatment with epinephrine are more likely to die. Epinephrine (EpiPen) therefore should always be immediately close at hand ie. not in the locker, in the car, in the hotel room, or next door. A person with asthma is more likely to have a fatal food reaction. An allergic reaction, especially anaphylaxis can recur 4 - 8 hours after initial treatment. It is important to go to the hospital immediately for further treatment and to be observed for several hours after.

If an allergic reaction to peanuts begins, use EpiPen immediately as soon as any allergy symptoms develop! Take the patient to hospital immediately, preferably by ambulance.

How can I tell if my peanut allergy is anaphylactic?

Most if not all peanut allergies are considered potentially anaphylactic. Even a mild food allergy can cause anaphylaxis if enough is eaten. Once you have been prescribed an EpiPen, it means that you have the potential for life-threatening reactions or are anaphylactic". Whether anaphylaxis will occur depends on how allergic a person is, how much of the food is eaten, how early treatment is started, whether Epinephrine (EpiPen) is given, and whether the person is having an asthma attack at the time or has chronic asthma.

I have had only a mild reaction to peanuts in the past, and have never had breathing difficulties. Why do I need an EpiPen ?

Peanut allergy is usually potentially life-threatening and life-long. Even if mild allergic reactions have occurred in the past, severe reactions can still occur with the same amount of food ie the allergy can worsen without warning. Do not also expect that you will have the same amount of time or warning before the reaction occurs as in the past. Therefore Epinephrine (EpiPen) should be available at all times.

Why is peanut allergy so dangerous?

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Even very small amounts can cause serious reactions. It may be found as a hidden, unlabelled part of a food sometimes because of accidental cross-contamination during manufacturing. Allergic reactions are often caused by eating unlabelled foods, by not checking food labels properly for presence of peanuts, or from foods which contain hidden unlabelled peanuts. Peanuts may be used in many of the foods that children like and often eat. The most common types of foods causing allergic reactions due to peanuts are chocolates, cookies, cakes with peanut-containing icing, and granola bars. Special occasions such as Easter, Halloween, Christmas and birthday parties are more dangerous for children with peanut allergy because there is more likely to be peanut-containing foods eaten, and because it is more difficult to supervise children properly then. At school, allergic reactions to peanuts can happen when peanut butter is used for school projects eg bird seed balls, or when other children eat peanut products and share with the allergic child, or the allergic child accidentally comes into contact with peanut on another child's hands, mouth, toys, desk or any other area where peanut butter traces are left.

What other food or activities may use peanuts?

Peanut butter may be used as a "glue" to hold foods together eg egg rolls, rice squares. Peanut butter or peanut flour may be added to barbecue sauce or other foods eg chili, mooshu sauce, plum sauce, marinades, curry sauce, pasta sauce and safety sauce to flavour or thicken them. Some bird seeds and animal foods eg gerbil food and dog biscuits may contain peanuts. Some people have reacted to playing with animals who have been fed peanut-containing food eg chichillas and gerbils, presumably because traces of peanut are on the hair of the animals. Peanuts may contaminate foods manufactured on the same machines as similar foods without peanuts eg cookies, breakfast cereals, cheese and crackers, chocolate, chocolate, raisin covered chocolate, ice cream.

I have eaten foods labelled "may contain nuts" without any problems. Should I still avoid them if I am allergic to peanut?

Definitely avoid them! Companies are allowed to use "may contain nuts" if they cannot guarantee that a food they are producing is free of nuts, usually because nuts are being used in the same machines for other foods. A company that makes similar foods with and without nuts, may have difficulty cleaning the machines in between making the different foods, or packages may be mislabelled. These food manufacturing machines were designed many years ago, and were never designed to be taken apart and cleaned properly. In addition, some of these machines cannot be cleaned with water. Therefore it is quite likely that when a food with nuts is put through the machine, traces of nuts remain on the machine. The first batches of foods made without nuts that go through the same machine will likely contain traces of nuts. Batches of foods done much later are less likely to contain traces of nuts but you cannot be sure which batch of food you are eating. Therefore they should be avoided. This cross-contamination is most likely to occur with cookies, candies, cereal, chocolate, ice cream, dried soups, and nut butters.

Do I have to avoid other nuts?

You do not have to avoid other nuts if you are only allergic to peanuts. However young children often avoid tree nuts if they are allergic to peanut because they cannot distinguish between different nuts properly, and also they are still at a higher risk of developing a tree nut allergy.
