

## Food Allergies—A Growing Concern

By Judi and Shari Zucker

**M**ore than 12 million people in the United States suffer from food allergies and the highest incidence is among children under the age of 18. There is no question that the number of children developing food allergies is growing, and strict avoidance of the offending food is the only way to prevent a reaction. However, what exactly is a food allergy? Is it the same as food intolerance? Although both involve food sensitivities, these two conditions are different.

A food allergy occurs when the body's immune system overreacts to a food, believing it is harmful. To protect itself, the immune system mistakenly produces antibodies called immunoglobulin E (IgE). These antibodies then cause the body to generate chemicals called histamines, which can cause an allergic response. This response can range from minor skin irritations, like an itchy rash or stuffy nose, to more serious respiratory problems, including life-threatening anaphylaxis. Signs of anaphylaxis, which usually occur within minutes after exposure to the allergen, typically include difficulty breathing and swallowing, and swelling of the lips, tongue and throat. Early administration of epinephrine (available in an injectable "pen") is critical for successful treatment.

A food intolerance is similar to an allergy in that it causes an adverse reaction to a food, and unlike an allergy, it does not involve the immune system. Symptoms of food intolerance often are headaches, skin rashes and/or digestive issues, also less severe and nonlife threatening.

Celiac disease, also known as gluten intolerance, is a digestive condition that, although not considered an allergy, involves an immune system response. For a person with Celiac, antibodies attack the lining of the small intestine when gluten is present. The lining becomes inflamed and is unable to absorb nutrients and minerals from food. A gluten-free diet-avoidance of all products containing wheat, rye, spelt, kamut and barley is the

only treatment for this condition.

Food manufacturers must clearly state in plain English the presence of any of the top allergenic foods on product labels. The top eight foods that trigger most allergic reactions are dairy, eggs, wheat, soy, peanuts, tree nuts, fish and crustacean shellfish. Currently however, manufacturers are not required to state if the food was processed in a facility that processes other allergenic foods – where the possibility of cross-contamination is a real concern. Fortunately, although they are not required to do so, a growing number of manufacturers are voluntarily including this information on labels. The note can state, for example, that the product was made in a "wheat-free" or "dairy-free" facility. Or, as a warning, it can say that the products "may contain wheat" or that it was "processed in a facility that also processes peanuts." Sometimes packaging can be deceiving.

For instance, a product can be labeled, dairy-free, yet in the ingredients there may be a milk protein called casein. Some soy and rice based cheeses have casein in them, and people who cannot digest dairy may experience a food intolerance to the product. When checking ingredient lists, be sure to also look for this additional note. If there isn't one, don't assume the product is safe. If there is any question regarding the possibility of a food product's cross-contact with an allergenic food, contact the manufacturer directly.

This increase in food allergies has led to a growing number of commercial products that are becoming readily available on store shelves. Initially, this may appear to be a good thing. The problem is that while

these products may be allergen-free, they are often short on nutrition. Commercially made crackers, chips, trail mixes, energy bars, cookies and other baked goods tend to be highly processed and loaded with sugar, salt, trans fat, preservatives, food colorings, and other undesirable ingredients. So what's the solution? How can you provide your child (or yourself) with snacks that are not only appealing, but nutritionally sound? The best answer is to make your own healthy, allergen-free foods. .

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Judi and Shari are the authors of five best selling books. They will be signing their latest book, *The Ultimate Allergy-Free Snack Cookbook* (Square One Publishers) at Chaucer's Book Store on March 1, Thursday at 6:30pm. Chaucer's is located at 3321 State Street in Santa Barbara.