

## Allergic reaction or overreaction?

Prima nutritionist **Fiona Hunter** takes a look at the latest hot topic to hit our plates. This month she investigates the rise in food intolerance and allergies

Sit down at any dinner party these days and there's bound to be at least one person around the table who claims to have a food allergy. Ten years ago allergies were rarely mentioned, now they're blamed for everything from cravings to chronic fatigue syndrome.

More than a third of us believe we have a food allergy, yet doctors put the actual figure at a mere two per cent. 'There's no doubt that food allergies exist and can cause unpleasant and even life-threatening symptoms for some people,' says Gail Pollard, a registered dietician specialising in food allergy and intolerance. 'We know the number of people suffering from allergies and intolerance is increasing, but what worries dieticians is the number of people who are now self-diagnosing. Cutting out major food groups, such as wheat and dairy, can lead to nutritional deficiencies.'

It's been estimated that as many as four out of ten people in the UK may suffer from food intolerance to some degree, as opposed to a food allergy. Nevertheless, it seems that many people find it easier to blame their headaches, bloating, lethargy and irritable bowel syndrome on this, rather than acknowledging the real cause of their problem, which is often a combination of stress and poor eating habits.

### Intolerance or allergy?

Food allergies occur when the immune system overreacts to a normally harmless food. The body produces antibodies, which trigger the release of histamine and other chemicals into the blood stream. This can cause a host of symptoms, from swelling of the lips, urticaria (nettle rash), stomach cramps, vomiting and diarrhoea, through to a severe reaction called an anaphylactic shock, which results in breathing difficulties, a drop in blood

pressure and, in some cases, death. Food allergies are easier than an intolerance to diagnose, via a skin-prick test or blood test.

A food intolerance can cause similar symptoms (although not anaphylactic shock), caused by different mechanisms, such as the digestive system failing to produce a particular enzyme needed to break down the food.

Any food can cause an allergy or intolerance, but common culprits are wheat, dairy, shellfish, citrus fruits, eggs and peanuts.

### Do I have a food allergy?

- You react to minute quantities of the food you might be allergic to.
- Your reactions are immediate, usually occurring between one minute and an hour after eating the food in question.
- Antihistamines can help control your symptoms.
- You've reacted to certain foods since being a child. Allergies can occur at any age, but are more common in children. Eight out ten children grow out of their food allergy by the age of five, while adults rarely outgrow allergies.
- One of your parents has the same allergy. Allergies tend to run in families, so children whose parents have a food allergy are more likely to be allergic themselves. Factors such as stress and poor diet can increase susceptibility to allergies and make existing allergies worse.

### Do I have a food intolerance?

- You can often tolerate small amounts of the food in question and it is only when the offending food is consumed in large quantities that it causes problems.
- Your reaction is sometimes delayed for several days.
- You've had a skin-prick test and a blood test, but nothing has shown up. A food intolerance is more difficult to diagnose than an allergy.

### Why are allergies increasing?

Several theories exist, ranging from our obsession with cleanliness – which some experts feel makes our immune system lazy and susceptible to allergens – through to increased use of chemicals, additives and antibiotics. But the truth is that no one really knows for sure.

To find out more about food allergies, visit **The Allergy Show at Olympia, London, from 17 to 19 June**. Tickets are £6 in advance or £9 on the door. Call 0870 040 4030 or visit [www.allergyshow.co.uk](http://www.allergyshow.co.uk).

