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Many children food allergies can be outgrown

Food allergies, a common childhood problem affecting up to 10 percent of 1 year-olds, challenge pediatricians and confuses parents. By late childhood, however, less than 2 percent of children are thought to have food allergies.

Why do allergies come and go? Is it possible to predict which allergies will disappear? When should a parent reintroduce a food that has caused a problem? These are important questions, since while most food allergies carry mild symptoms, they can be life-threatening in some cases.

Although medical scientists aren't sure why, most children lose their food allergies over time. Milk can be reintroduced to the majority of milk intolerant youngsters by age 3 and egg allergies disappear in most children by age 6 or 7. Allergies to fruits (strawberries and citrus), vegetables (tomatoes), and grains are usually short-lived, while peanut, tree nut, fish, and shell-fish allergies are more likely to be lifelong.

Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to predict which child will outgrow any particular allergy or how long the process could take. Some children, for example, may outgrow a milk allergy in 8 to 10 months, while others may take 8 to 10 years.

Symptoms associated with food allergies vary, ranging from vomiting to rashes that include itchy hives or reddish bumps. In some cases, there may be redness and swelling of the skin, coughing and wheezing or difficulty breathing.

In diagnosing a food allergy, physicians ask these questions: Do the symptoms disappear when the suspect food is removed from the diet and return later with re-exposure? And although not always helpful, do blood and skin tests confirm the diagnosis of an allergic problem?

It is important to diagnose food allergy early and take appropriate action. The first step is eliminating the food that is causing problems. Once that happens, the symptoms disappear and the child feels better. The child and family must learn about which foods to avoid and how to respond to an emergency, a potentially lifesaving lesson. Avoiding problematic foods may allow them to be reintroduced earlier and decrease allergies in general.

Look for a pediatrician or allergist experienced in evaluating and treating of a food allergy, because they closely monitor symptoms, growth and development. To improve the chance of success and assure safety, a specialist with experience in nutritional issues should supervise the introduction of a diet that avoids the problematic foods, and often complex and potentially dangerous process.

Since allergies to fruits, vegetables, and grains are quickly outgrown, consider reintroducing the food after about six months without symptoms. Because nut and fish allergies tend to last much longer, reintroduction would usually be considered, after 12 months. This should take place only under the supervision of a physician, who will make recommendations based on the severity of the initial reaction and whether or not blood tests were positive.

Food allergies are often the first expression of allergic difficulties in general. Although not proven, many specialists feel that early, effective treatment of a food allergy could prevent other allergies such as asthma and eczema. Since early intervention can be both life changing and lifesaving, speak with your pediatrician about any worrisome issues, as every parental concern is important.

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