



# FOOD FACTS

From the U.S. Food and Drug Administration

## Food Allergies

### What You Need to Know

Each year, millions of Americans have allergic reactions to food. Although most food allergies cause relatively mild and minor symptoms, some food allergies can cause severe reactions, and may even be life-threatening.

There is no cure for food allergies. Strict avoidance of food allergens — and early recognition and management of allergic reactions to food — are important measures to prevent serious health consequences.



### FDA's Role: New Labeling for 2006

To help Americans avoid the health risks posed by food allergens, Congress passed the **Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004**. The new law applies to all foods regulated by FDA, both domestic and imported, that are labeled on or after January 1, 2006. (FDA regulates all foods except meat, poultry, and certain egg products.)

- Before the new law, the labels of foods made from two or more ingredients were required to list all **ingredients** by their common, or usual, names. The names of some ingredients, however, do not clearly identify their source.
- Now, the labels required by the new law must clearly identify the **source** of all ingredients that are — or are derived from — the **eight most common food allergens**.

As a result, food labels will help allergic consumers to identify offending foods or ingredients so they can more easily avoid them.

#### About Foods Labeled Before January 1, 2006

Food products labeled *before* January 1, 2006 were not required to be re-labeled under the new law. However, these foods may still be on store shelves — so be sure to take that into consideration while shopping, and always use special care when reading labels.

### What Are Major Food Allergens?

While more than 160 foods can cause allergic reactions in people with food allergies, the new law identifies the eight most common allergenic foods. These foods account for 90 percent of food allergic reactions, and are the food sources from which many other ingredients are derived.

*The eight foods identified by the law are:*

1. **Milk**
2. **Eggs**
3. **Fish** (e.g., bass, flounder, cod)
4. **Crustacean shellfish** (e.g., crab, lobster, shrimp)
5. **Tree nuts** (e.g., almonds, walnuts, pecans)
6. **Peanuts**
7. **Wheat**
8. **Soybeans**

These eight foods, and any ingredient that contains protein derived from one or more of them, are designated as “major food allergens” by the new law.

### How Major Food Allergens Are Listed

The new law requires that food labels identify the food source of all major food allergens. Unless the food source of a major food allergen is part of the ingredient’s common or usual name (or is already identified in the ingredient list), it must be included in **one of two ways**.

The name of the food source of a major food allergen must appear:

1. **In parentheses** following the name of the ingredient.  
*Examples:* “lecithin (soy),” “flour (wheat),” and “whey (milk)”

— OR —

2. **Immediately after or next to** the list of ingredients in a “contains” statement.  
*Example:* “Contains Wheat, Milk, and Soy.”



## Food Allergies: What to Do If Symptoms Occur

The appearance of symptoms (see *Know the Symptoms* at right) after eating food may be a sign of a food allergy. The food(s) that caused these symptoms should be avoided, and the affected person, should contact a doctor or health care provider for appropriate testing and evaluation.

- Persons found to have a food allergy should be taught to **read labels** and **avoid the offending foods**. They should also be taught, in case of accidental ingestion, to **recognize the early symptoms** of an allergic reaction, and be properly educated on — and armed with — appropriate treatment measures.
- Persons with a known food allergy who begin experiencing symptoms while, or after, eating a food should **initiate treatment immediately**, and go to a **nearby emergency room** if symptoms progress.

### Know the Symptoms

Symptoms of food allergies typically appear from within a few minutes to two hours after a person has eaten the food to which he or she is allergic.

#### *Allergic reactions can include:*

- Hives
- Flushed skin or rash
- Tingling or itchy sensation in the mouth
- Face, tongue, or lip swelling
- Vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Coughing or wheezing
- Dizziness and/or lightheadedness
- Swelling of the throat and vocal cords
- Difficulty breathing
- Loss of consciousness

#### *About Other Allergens*

Persons may still be allergic to — and have serious reactions to — foods *other* than the eight foods identified by the new law. So, always be sure to read the food label's ingredient list carefully to avoid the food allergens in question.

## The Hard Facts:

### *Severe Food Allergies Can Be Life-Threatening*

Following ingestion of a food allergen(s), a person with food allergies can experience a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction called **anaphylaxis**.

#### *This can lead to:*

- constricted airways in the lungs
- severe lowering of blood pressure and shock (“**anaphylactic shock**”)
- suffocation by swelling of the throat

Each year in the U.S., it is estimated that anaphylaxis to food results in:

- 30,000 emergency room visits
- 2,000 hospitalizations
- 150 deaths

Prompt administration of epinephrine by autoinjector (e.g., Epi-pen) during early symptoms of anaphylaxis may help prevent these serious consequences.



#### **Allergy Alert:**

***Mild Symptoms Can Become More Severe***

Initially mild *symptoms* that occur after ingesting a food allergen are not always a measure of mild *severity*. In fact, if not treated promptly, these symptoms can become more serious in a very short amount of time, and could lead to **anaphylaxis**. See *The Hard Facts* at left.

*For more information on food allergies, visit*  
[www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/alrgqa.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/alrgqa.html)

