



Cooperative Extension Service

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Food Gone Bad Food Allergies & Intolerances

I typically prefer to speak about the positive aspects of food, but there are a few cases when certain foods just don't agree with certain people. Two common causes for such issues are food allergies and food intolerances. While some of their symptoms may be similar these often confused conditions are triggered in very different ways, and require specific strategies for treatment.

Food intolerances (or food sensitivities) are quite common and are usually to blame when one has an adverse reaction to a food. In fact, lactose intolerance affects approximately 75% of the world's population, and nearly everyone has had symptoms of food intolerance at some point in their lives. The nausea, gas, diarrhea, and headaches that result are often a result of an inability to properly digest the offending food.

Food intolerances can usually be identified by paying careful attention to foods eaten prior to the appearance of symptoms. Symptoms will often be dose-related, meaning small amounts may only trigger slight symptoms, if any at all. In fact, many individuals with lactose intolerance can comfortably drink milk as long as it's taken in small amounts with other foods.

True food allergies are much less common than intolerances and sensitivities. They currently affect less than 5% of the population, though research shows that this number is increasing. Common allergies include nuts (especially peanuts), fish, milk, and eggs. With a food allergy the problem is not digestion, but an inappropriate immune system response to ingredients in the food. This can cause symptoms like rashes, swelling, and in severe cases, anaphylaxis.

Food allergies seem to run in families, so the condition may be inherited (another opportunity to blame your parents!). As opposed to intolerances, food allergy reactions will likely be triggered any time the offending food is contacted, even in very small amounts. This makes careful attention to foods a priority as the consequences can be severe.

Whether it is an allergy or intolerance it is important to identify the trigger and work to limit or eliminate contact. Limiting or avoiding foods altogether can be a difficult task, especially if you're trying to maintain a healthy, well-balanced diet. Working with a registered dietitian can take the pressure off, however, as they're the experts in developing good eating habits while avoiding problem foods.

In this season of giving (and receiving) please be mindful of problem foods—your own as well as others'. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*