

FAQs about Peanut/Nut Allergies

What is a food allergy?

- A food allergy is an inappropriate reaction of the body's immune system to what should be an innocent and innocuous food. The immune system identifies the food as 'foreign' and attacks the mast cells in organs and tissues with histamines.
- The histamines cause many tissues reactions and changes: the nose & eyes may itch and swell, the airways may become constricted, the gastrointestinal tract may react with cramping and vomiting, and the skin may itch and swell.
- Highly allergic individuals may experience anaphylaxis, a potentially fatal reaction involving the cardiovascular system.

Can ingestion of small fragments of peanuts/nuts be enough to cause life-threatening anaphylaxis?

- Absolutely, yes. Even small amounts of peanut dust or peanut molecules could be life-threatening.

Can touching peanuts or being touched by peanut residue be enough to endanger a child's life?

- Absolutely, yes. The residue on skin would cause swelling and a rash, and could proceed to a life-threatening situation.

Will antihistamines stop these reactions?

- For some allergies and some people, antihistamines will bring the symptoms under control.
- For other people and some allergies, antihistamines are not adequate treatment.

Will the administration of epipenepherine stop these reactions?

- An epi-pen will slow down the response if administered promptly, giving the patient time to get to a hospital. It does not stop the reaction. After the allergic reaction begins, there is no certainty that even the hospital will be able to stop the reaction.

What approaches help manage peanut/nut allergies?

- The only approach at this time is complete avoidance of peanuts and nuts.
- This includes awareness of hidden allergens, cross-contamination, and indirect exposure (touch or inhalation of peanut dust).
- Even smelling peanuts is the first warning sign that there may be peanuts in the area, and those affected are told to trust his/her sense of smell and avoid that situation.
- There are, however, several promising research projects that may offer help in the future.

Why don't all children with peanut/nut allergies require a peanut/nut-free environment?

- Just as with other medical conditions, not all patients have exactly the same degree of sensitivity nor do they have the same complicating conditions.
- Many children with peanut allergies also have asthma, which may make it more difficult for them to respond to treatment during an anaphylactic reaction.

Where can a person find more information?

- The best website for general information is www.foodallergy.org that is maintained by Food Allergy Network.
- There is some information available for the public at www.aaaai.org (American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology).
- The Peanut Allergy Answer Book, by Dr. Michael C. Young, 2001.