

The reaction can be mild tingling or it could be life-threatening.

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH health system and broadcast from the beautiful studios at St. Barnabas Hospital. I'm Steven Clark.

A food allergy is an immune system reaction that occurs after eating a certain food. Even a tiny amount of the allergy-causing food can trigger digestive problems, hives, or swollen airways. In some people, a food allergy can cause a life-threatening reaction known as anaphylaxis.

With us today to discuss food allergies is Dr. Allison Smith, an allergist at SBH Health System. Welcome, Dr. Smith.

Hi thanks for having me back.

Q. Food allergies are more common with children. Does that mean that many children will outgrow their allergy over time?

A. The majority of kids will outgrow food allergies. The most common among small children are things like milk, egg, wheat, and soy and generally they will outgrow those as they get older. They can also develop allergies to peanuts, tree nuts and shellfish as they get older, and unfortunately most will not outgrow those allergies.

Q. Now a food allergy is different than a food intolerance, right?

A. Yes. So a lot of people will think that they have a food allergy when they are more likely lactose intolerant, where maybe they get diarrhea or distention when they drink milk. They think of that as a food allergy, but when we're talking about true food allergies we're talking about an abnormal immune response to a food.

Q. Can a food allergy become progressively worse over time?

A. Absolutely. Sometimes you could have a really mild reaction, maybe a little itching with some food or a little bit of rash and then the next time you could develop anaphylaxis and that's where it's scary because we don't know what the next reaction is going to be.

Q. Why don't you describe what anaphylaxis is?

A. There's different criteria for anaphylaxis, but the most common one that I like to use is any two systems are involved. So if you have let's say skin involvement where you have hives or swelling and then you have any respiratory involvement let's say a dry cough or wheezing or shortness of breath that would be anaphylaxis. We're also looking at systems like the GI system so if you're having abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea that would be another system.

Q. Okay now anaphylaxis is where you use the EpiPen?

A. Yes. So we recommend that anyone who has a food allergy that they carry an EpiPen when they might be exposed to food so they should have them in schools, they should have them at home, they should have them on them if they're going to go anywhere where there is food and so we recommend using the EpiPen if there are any signs of a really serious allergic reaction and it's a really easy thing to use. People are very scared to use EpiPens, but it's life-saving and it's just a

needle that you press into your leg, like it's an auto-injector and then after you use it you have to go to the emergency room.

Q. Do you have kids using it too?

A. Yes, so there's different dosages for EpiPen. We have EpiPens for kids because it's weight based and we have EpiPens for adults.

Q. I'm guessing you don't test for a food allergy until there's an episode right?

A. Yes so you know the problem with the skin and blood testing for allergies is that there is a high false positive rate so we only recommend testing for foods if there's a concern that that food might be causing a reaction. So you know the gold standard for testing is a food challenge so if you're eating something right now and you're fine eating it then you're not allergic to it. We do testing specifically for foods that were concerned about.

Q. What does the testing entail?

A. So there's different ways to do testing. The ones we do commonly in the office are skin testing and it's you know similar to testing we do for other allergies like pollen allergies. It's very easy we just press something onto the top of the skin it leaves a little drop of liquid and a very small amount is injected into the skin and then you wait 15 minutes and if you get a little itchy bump or hive that tells us that you're sensitized to it. Again it doesn't tell us if you're truly going to have a reaction but it will tell us if you have those allergic antibodies in your body and the blood testing is very similar. We're looking for specific reactions from your body in the blood.

Q. So you can diagnose a specific food allergy relatively quickly right from the time they come in?

A. Exactly. So as long as they're not on allergy medicine or there's no reason why they can't have skin testing done, we can tell in about 15 minutes if they have allergic antibodies in their body to that food.

Q. Are food allergies genetic?

A. You know it's multifactorial. You know definitely if you have a genetic predisposition to become an allergic person. Let's say your family has asthma and eczema and other allergies then you are at a higher risk of developing food allergy. But just because mom has a shellfish allergy doesn't mean that she passes that shellfish allergy on to her child.

Q. Are food allergies seasonal? Or are they constant throughout the course of the year?

A. They're constant. That brings up oral allergy syndrome which I think is a really interesting phenomenon. That's where when you have certain pollen allergies, such as you know spring tree allergy, when you bite into certain fruits or vegetables particularly from things that come from trees sometimes you might have a localized reaction in your mouth and this is actually really common and sometimes you might notice it more during the season. The most common thing we'll see is people with a birch tree allergy, which is a spring allergy. When they bite into pitted

fruits, particularly apples or things like peaches, pears or cherries they might feel some itching in their mouth, maybe a little funniness in their throat and it feels like a true food allergy but it's actually oral allergy syndrome where it's because your body, when you bite into the fruit, it thinks you're biting into the pollen and it's generally not dangerous and you don't need an EpiPen. And if you cook the food just a little bit the reaction goes away.

Q. I know there was an old movie I once saw about a woman who had an allergy to shellfish and I guess she decided she was going to go for broke and she ate like a 4-pound lobster and ended up with hives all over her body. Does it matter the quantity of food you eat if you're allergic to a certain type of food?

A. You know it really depends on the person. So you know some people if they eat a very small amount or it's cooked in a certain way they're okay but you know they only have a reaction of they eat a ton of it but you know the other person you might react to a very small amount and then and that's the concerning part where we really don't know how much it's going to take for you and have a really bad reaction and we don't know when you might anaphylaxis so that's why it's really recommended to avoid the food if you're allergic to it.

Q. How do you know it's not the seasoning or the way the food's prepared? Can that have an effect as well?

A. People are always asking about artificial colors and preservatives. It's actually pretty uncommon to react to those. It's not that it doesn't happen. So when I take a history of a patient, when they're telling me about the food I do think about the most common things so if the food contains shellfish, fish, nuts, peanuts or seeds, the most likely thing is going to be those foods. But if they're reacting to a bunch of different foods and the one common ingredient is a certain type of seasoning, then it most likely is the seasoning.

Q. I know one person in particular who has a terrible allergy to eggplant and she can literally walk into a room where someone ordered an eggplant pizza down the hall and it will affect her to the point that she has to go to the emergency room.

A. Yeah you know it's interesting because a lot of people will say that if they're just around the food or they smell it. They've done studies where you really shouldn't react just from smelling the food. The issue is if it is cooked or aerosolized so if you're in a restaurant where they're frying or let's say boiling shellfish and it's getting into the air there are small amounts of particles that you could inhale and that could cause either asthma or maybe some itching. You know a lot of times we do think there may be some anxiety or stress involved. So if someone you see someone eating a peanut butter jelly sandwich across the room and you start get feeling really itchy that's probably a little bit more anxiety.

Q. if you're allergic to one food is it likely you're going to be allergic down the road to other foods as well? Is there any connection to that?

A. You know if you do have a risk of food allergy you're at a higher risk of developing other food allergies than someone who's not allergic. There are times when if you react to one food in

a certain group let's say shrimp you could react to other shellfish or if you're allergic to one nut you could react to other types of nuts.

Q. Again I think we may have touched on this briefly before, but you have an adult who's 45, 50, 55, 60 without any history of food allergies and bang!! They can still get a food allergy, right?

A. Yeah unfortunately it's just thing you know like seasonal allergies you could be fine for years and then develop something happens with your immune system mean you develop that allergy. What's really interesting around the Bronx is I see a lot of shrimp allergy and when I first started here I couldn't quite figure out why everyone was developing a shrimp allergy versus other types of food allergies and when I did a little more research and we actually did a little research study here we found out that what you're allergic to in shrimp is the same thing you're allergic to in cockroaches and dust mites and we all know in the Bronx we have a lot of cockroaches and dust mites and the thought is that people are becoming sensitized to the cockroach and dust mite and then over time when they start to you know they continue to eat shrimp, their body sees that shrimp as foreign as almost as if they're ingesting cockroaches or dust mites so I think things like that can really start to trigger food allergy symptoms and older adults.

Q. That's interesting. So environment can impact on your allergies over that period of time? Do you recommend that people who have allergies wear bracelets or something that may indicate that they have this allergy?

A. Yeah, there are you know bracelets or you know other things you can wear in case you develop a serious reaction you're not able to verbalize what you're allergic to. The most important thing is that, once you know what you're allergic to is whenever you go to a restaurant or anywhere where you're gonna have prepared foods you need to instruct the waiter and the chef that what you're allergic to so there isn't any accidental contamination.

Il Dr. Smith thank you for being here today if someone wants to go to you for testing is there a number they can call? Yes, they can call the Asthma Center at 718-960-3100.

S: Okay great well thank you for joining us today at SBH Bronx Health Talk. For information on available services at SBH health system visit WWW.SBHNY.ORG and thank you for being here today