

# Let's Talk About...

## Food Allergies in Children

In the past, parents were encouraged to wait until a child was older to give foods that commonly cause allergies. However, we now know that **it's best to give these foods on the same schedule you give other foods**. Read this handout for more details, and see [page 2](#) for guidelines.

### What are the signs of food allergies?

When a child has a food allergy, the body acts as if the food is harmful and releases chemicals to try to protect itself. These chemicals can cause allergic reactions including:

- **Skin problems**, such as itchy red bumps on the skin (hives) or itchy, dry rashes (eczema)
- **Breathing problems**, such as a runny or stuffy nose (hay fever), sneezing, coughing, asthma, or shortness of breath
- **Gut problems**, such as belly (abdominal) pain, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- **Anaphylaxis** [an-uh-fuh-LAX-iss], which is a rare but sudden and serious reaction causing breathing problems, low blood pressure, and loss of consciousness

### Which foods cause allergies?

A child can develop an allergy to any food, but most food allergies are caused by:

- Cow's milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts (such as almonds, cashews, and walnuts)
- Sesame seeds
- Wheat (gluten)
- Soy
- Fish (such as tuna or cod)
- Shellfish (such as shrimp, crab, and lobster)



Help prevent food allergies in your child by starting to give new foods when they are between 4 and 6 months old.

### How do I know if my child is at risk?

Children have a **greater risk** of food allergies if they have asthma, skin problems (such as eczema), or a parent or sibling with known allergies.

Children have a **lower risk** of food allergies if they are exposed to different foods and the germs that live in their everyday environment. For example, it is important to keep your child's hands clean, but don't wash their hands with an anti-bacterial soap because it can kill too many germs.

### Should I have my child tested?

Most children do not need allergy tests. Skin tests may be needed if your child has a strong family history of allergies or if they have skin problems or other symptoms that are difficult to control.

## Introducing table foods to your child

- **If possible, offer only breast milk for the first 4 to 6 months.** This can reduce the chance of getting of skin problems (like eczema), asthma, and cow's milk allergy in some children.

If this is not possible, regular infant formula is fine for most babies. If your child has at higher chance of developing allergies, your healthcare provider may suggest trying different types of formula. Talk to your healthcare provider for ideas.

- **Give a few other foods before starting with the foods that commonly cause allergies.** Once your child has tried a few different foods, go ahead and start with these.
- **Give table foods when your child can hold up their head and sit with support (usually between 4 and 6 months of age).** It's important to wait because a child who doesn't have good head control can choke on food more easily. You won't avoid allergies by waiting longer than 6 months to give new foods.
- **Start with single-ingredient foods.** First foods in the U.S. are usually:
  - Rice or oat cereal.
  - Yellow or orange vegetables, such as sweet potatoes, squash, and carrots.
  - Fruits, such as apples, pears, and bananas.
  - Green vegetables, such as peas and spinach.
  - Meats, such as chicken and beef.
  - Peanut butter and nut butters. These should be thinned with water or another liquid to prevent choking. **Talk to your child's doctor before giving these foods if there is a family history of peanut or nut allergies.**

Fruits and vegetables that contain a lot of citric acid, such as berries, tomatoes, oranges, and grapefruit, sometimes cause rashes. In most cases, these are not allergies. They are short-term reactions to the juice.



## Introducing foods that commonly cause allergies

- **Don't give your child regular cow's milk for the first year.** Give breast milk or formula instead. Giving only cow's milk before 12 months does not cause allergies, but it could increase your child's chance of getting anemia. You can offer foods like yogurt and cheese.
- **Give foods that commonly cause allergies on the same schedule as other table foods.** Your child's chances of developing allergies is lower if these foods are given starting at 4 months.
- **Give your child a first taste of the food at home.** Don't start a new food at day care or a restaurant. For some foods, such as peanuts, reactions usually happen after the first few bites. If your child does not have a reaction, you can give the food in larger amounts and away from home.

## What about the mother's diet?

During pregnancy or breastfeeding, you don't need to avoid the foods that commonly cause allergies. However, if your child shows signs of intolerance shortly after delivery, it may be recommended that you avoid certain foods.

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