

Factsheet on peanut allergy

What is peanut allergy?

Peanut allergy is a reaction of the immune system – sometimes extreme – to peanuts. It affects an estimated 0.5 to 1 percent of people in the United States and other Western countries. The severity of reactions varies, with some people so allergic that even breathing near peanut products can

result in death within minutes. In some developed countries such food allergies are the leading cause of visits to emergency rooms for a potentially fatal reaction called anaphylaxis, and that most fatal or near-fatal cases are from peanut allergy.

Which are the countries most affected?

Allergies to food stuffs exist everywhere in the world but data are sparse. Reports of peanut allergy are increasing in Western countries. In the United States, for example, the number of children reported to be allergic to peanuts doubled from 1997 through 2002. Peanut allergy can develop at any age, but often starts in infancy or toddler years. In most people, the allergy continues into adulthood. The reasons for the increase in peanut allergy are not yet clear, but could include an increase in peanut products in foods; earlier exposure to peanuts, including exposure while in the womb or from breast-feeding; or a true increase in sensitivity to potentially

allergenic substances.

Peanuts are a good source of protein and are frequently eaten in low-income countries, but, in general, these countries do not have statistics about their rates of peanut allergy. The potential severity of the reaction and the widespread prevalence observed in developed countries, however, suggest that a similar picture may be present but as yet unrecorded across the globe. Thus peanut allergy has been selected as one priority condition for estimation in the context of the WHO Initiative to Estimate the Global Burden of Foodborne Diseases.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include inflammation, hives, itching, flushing, or swelling of the skin or mucous membranes. The mouth or throat may itch, tingle, or swell. Coughing, wheezing, tightness of the chest, difficulty breathing, and nasal inflammation may occur, as well as abdominal pain, cramps, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Other symptoms include irregular heart beat; dangerously low blood pressure and low blood flow to organs; or a blue appearance of the lips, tongue, nailbeds, or skin.

The symptoms and severity of peanut allergy vary from person to person, as does the time to onset. Some people develop a reaction within minutes after exposure, while others might not react for hours. In some cases, people have an initial reaction that is not severe and subsides, and develop a second, severe reaction up to four hours later. In some other cases, allergic reactions worsen more quickly.

What are severe reactions?

A severe reaction to peanuts is a medical emergency requiring immediate medical care; death from anaphylactic shock (the most severe form of acute allergic reaction) can occur within minutes as a result of suffocation and extremely low blood pressure, followed by total collapse of the circulatory system. People with severe peanut allergy should carry antihistamines and epinephrine injections or inhalers at all times, as prescribed by their health-care providers.

These medications help control the reaction until professional medical help arrives.

Symptoms tend to be worse in adults than in infants and children, especially in adults who first became allergic in infancy. People with both peanut allergy and asthma are more likely than others to have severe reactions. However, people of any age can have severe, dangerous symptoms of peanut allergy. Some evidence suggests that symptoms increase with age and with each reaction.

Why estimate the global burden of peanut allergy?

Assessing the true health impact and cost of allergic reactions to peanuts is needed to adequately inform policy-makers of the size of the problem. Particularly in countries where peanuts are consumed as staple food and the size of the problem may be vastly underestimated, scientific evidence will consolidate

political will to monitor and prevent illness and death from this condition. WHO, through the Initiative to Estimate the Global Burden of Foodborne Diseases, will provide the missing information and enable policy-makers to make sound decisions based on reliable, scientific data.



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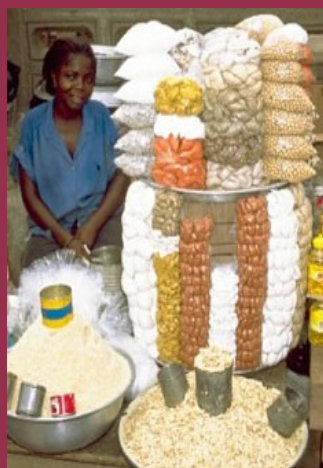
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