

## **Food Intolerances & Food Intolerance Testing**

### **I'm not sure if I have a food allergy or a food intolerance, what's the difference?**

The term “food hypersensitivity” is used as an umbrella term to describe objectively reproducible symptoms to a food that is usually tolerated by most people. Food Allergy is used where the symptoms are caused by an overreaction of the immune system to a protein in the offending food. Food allergies can be further subdivided into IgE and non IgE mediated reactions and this is discussed further in another article (Cow's milk protein allergy and lactose intolerance – what's the difference?). Non allergic food hypersensitivity is the preferred term to describe reactions to foods that do not have an immunological mechanism e.g. lactose intolerance.

Food intolerances are much more common than food allergies. The onset of symptoms is usually slower and may be delayed by many hours after eating the offending food. The symptoms may also last for several hours, even into the next day and sometimes longer. Intolerance to several foods or a group of foods is not uncommon, and it can be much more difficult to decide whether food intolerance is the cause of chronic illness, and which foods or substances may be responsible.

### **What are the symptoms of food intolerance and what causes it?**

The symptoms caused by food intolerances are varied but are often gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating, diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting and irritable bowel. Other symptoms can include skin rashes and sometimes fatigue, joint pain, dark circles under the eyes, night sweats & other chronic conditions.

Food intolerances can have a number of different causes such as: Enzyme defects (e.g. lactose intolerance), pharmacological (e.g. amines in certain cheeses), toxic (e.g. undercooked chickpeas), histamine in foods, salicylates in foods and additives in food.

### **Are there any accurate diagnostic tests for food intolerances?**

No unfortunately at present apart from lactose intolerance (which can be diagnosed by your GP) there are currently NO reliable and / or validated clinical tests for the diagnosis of food intolerance. Despite this there are many places such as pharmacies and food intolerance clinics where you can buy expensive, so called food allergy and / or intolerance tests such as Lorisian or York Testing (further information on these below). The IFAN (Irish Food Allergy Network) produced a consensus statement on food intolerance testing stating that:

“There is neither a rational scientific basis nor proven role for hair analysis, isolated IgG testing, Kinesiology, Vega testing or Enzyme Potentiated Desensitization for diagnosing or managing food allergy or intolerance”.

Very similar position statements have also been produced by The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, The European Academy of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, Allergy UK and NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence).

The gold standard and only reliable way to find out if you may have a food intolerance is by keeping a very clear food and symptom diary alongside a food elimination and reintroduction diet. This is best done under the supervision of a qualified dietitian in order to prevent any nutritional deficiencies when cutting out foods and / or food groups which can lead to poor growth in children and unintentional weight loss in adults.

## **But what about testing for the presence of food- specific immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies?**

Although food intolerances are non-immune by definition, IgG testing is actively promoted for diagnosis and to guide management. The York Test, Lorisian and the Fitzwilliam food test all check your blood for the presence of food-specific immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies. Unlike IgE antibodies, which occur in abnormally large quantities in people with allergies, IgG antibodies are found in both allergic and non-allergic people. Experts believe that the production of IgG antibodies is a normal response to eating food and not that you are intolerant to that food and therefore this is not a helpful test in diagnosing a food allergy or intolerance. The lack of correlation between results and actual symptoms, and the risks resulting from unnecessary food avoidance, escalate the potential harm from these tests. The Yorktest website cites a placebo-controlled study which it claims demonstrates its IgG test reduced symptoms in patients already diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). This finding has been criticized for multiple shortcomings, suggesting the effectiveness of the test in this population remains to be established.

Again many worldwide and international Allergy networks such as IFAN (Irish Food Allergy Network), the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology and Allergy UK all state that IgG antibody tests for food allergy or intolerance do not have clinical relevance, are not validated, lack sufficient quality control and should not be performed.

## **So what can I do if I think I have a food intolerance?**

If you are concerned that either you or your child has either a food allergy or intolerance, you should first go to your GP so that they can make sure the symptoms are not indicative of anything more serious. If a food intolerance is still suspected the first step is to keep a very strict food and symptom diary and to speak with a qualified registered dietitian who can help guide you through any elimination diets that may be needed and appropriate for the individual adult or child. A list of qualified dietitians in your area can be found at [www.indi.ie](http://www.indi.ie) "Find a Dietitian".

