



# Food Allergies Fifth Leading Chronic Illness in US



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By Dr. Mercola

Food allergies are the fifth leading chronic illness in the US – and their incidence is on the rise.<sup>1</sup> From 1997 to 2007, food allergies increased 18 percent among children under 18 years,<sup>2</sup> and today an estimated one out of every 13 children has a food allergy.<sup>3</sup>

It's known that food allergies tend to run in families, which suggests a genetic component. However, other theories for why food allergies are becoming commonplace point to a more complex environmental, as well as lifestyle-related, cause.

## Why Are Allergies on the Rise?

One of the primary hidden contributing factors to allergies is the food you eat, and I am not talking about food allergies. If you eat poor-quality foods, especially ones that cause insulin/[leptin](#) resistance, you will increase your risk of allergies.

When you're allergic to a substance, your immune system mistakenly believes it is dangerous and produces immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies in an attempt to neutralize it. Chemicals such as histamine released into your bloodstream during this process can lead to a battery of symptoms any time you eat the food (although symptoms may not appear until hours later).

What's behind this immune system dysfunction is still being explored, although a leading theory is the [hygiene hypothesis](#). A child raised in an environment devoid of dirt and germs, and who is given antibiotics that kill off all of the bacteria in his gut, is not able to build up natural resistance to disease, and becomes vulnerable to illnesses later in life.

This is likely one reason why many allergies and immune system diseases have doubled, tripled, or even quadrupled in the last few decades. Low levels of [vitamin D](#) have also been associated with an increased risk of food allergies,<sup>4</sup> while some theorize that food additives, genetic modification, hormones, and herbicides added to foods may be triggering some cases.

Genetic engineering, for instance, can increase existing allergens, or produce new, unknown allergens. Both appear to have happened in [genetically modified \(GM\) soy](#), which is found in the majority of processed foods. At the same time, more children are being born and raised with severely damaged gut flora, which is largely the product of poor diet and antibiotics overuse, leading to [Gut and Psychology Syndrome \(GAPS\)](#), as I'll explain shortly.

## Allergies Are Everywhere and Cluster in Groups

New research has revealed that allergies are virtually everywhere in the US, with no region being allergy-free. The study of more than 8,000 people revealed that 45 percent of people aged six and over tested positive for at least one allergen, as did 36 percent of children aged one to five.<sup>5</sup>

There were some variations by region, such as in large metropolitan areas, where 50 percent of residents were sensitized to at least one allergen, compared to 40 percent in rural areas. In urban areas, outdoor allergens were more common than in rural areas, possibly because respiratory allergies are associated with air pollution.

Also noteworthy was the finding that allergies tended to cluster in groups. People with sensitivities to dust mites were more likely to be sensitive to grass and tree pollen, for instance, while those with peanut sensitivity more likely to also have plant allergies. This might imply that when it comes to allergy treatment, a more holistic approach to treatment is warranted, with the most sensible starting point your gut (where 80 percent of your immune system resides).

## Modifying Your Diet May Fight Asthma

Allergies and asthma often occur together, so it's not surprising that modifying your diet, and thereby your gut health, appears to be an effective treatment for both of these conditions. In a recent animal study, mice fed a high-fiber diet had stronger resistance against asthma-like attacks than mice fed a low-fiber or regular diet.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, when mice fed a fiber-rich diet were exposed to dust mites, they had less airway inflammation than the low-fiber mice. As reported by *Scientific American*:<sup>7</sup>

*“Seems that fiber supports gut bacteria that produce anti-inflammatory molecules called short chain fatty acids. These molecules then enter the bloodstream, where they can influence the immune system. An over-reactive immune system can play a role in allergies and asthma. But the fatty acids can calm down the immune reaction.”*

Separate research also showed that school-aged children who drank [raw milk](#) were 41 percent less likely to develop asthma and about 50 percent less likely to develop hay fever than children who

drank store-bought (pasteurized) milk.<sup>8</sup>

The researchers believed that the beneficial effect may have been due to non-denatured whey proteins, including bovine serum albumin (BSA) and alpha-lactalbumin, in the raw milk, which may support immune system health and healthful inflammation levels.

## If You Have Allergies, Tend to Your Gut Health

Remember, the quality of and the types of food you eat are related to your allergy risk. One of the ways they mediate that is through your gut bacteria. Your gut bacteria play a crucial role in the development and operation of the mucosal immune system in your digestive tract.

They also aid in the production of antibodies to pathogens. Friendly bacteria even train your immune system to distinguish between pathogens and non-harmful antigens, and to respond appropriately. This important function prevents your immune system from overreacting to non-harmful antigens, which is the genesis of allergies.

However, as mentioned earlier, abnormalities in your immune system are a common outcome of GAPS, as when your gut flora is abnormal, your gut lining is more prone to deteriorate, since it is actively maintained by your gut flora.

Leaky gut is a condition that occurs due to the development of gaps between the cells (enterocytes) that make up the membrane lining your intestinal wall. These tiny gaps allow substances such as undigested food, bacteria, and metabolic wastes that should be confined to your digestive tract to escape into your bloodstream -- hence the term leaky gut syndrome.

Once the integrity of your intestinal lining is compromised, and there is a steady flow of toxic substances "leaking out" into your bloodstream, your body experiences significant increases in inflammation. Besides being associated with inflammatory bowel diseases like Crohn's and ulcerative colitis, or celiac disease, leaky gut can also be a contributing factor to allergies. In 2010, researchers similarly concluded that eating a junk food diet increases kids' risk of allergies:<sup>9, 10</sup>

*"Pediatrician Dr. Paolo Lionetti, of Florence University, and colleagues said children in industrialized countries who eat low-fiber, high-sugar 'Western' diets may reduce microbial richness -- potentially contributing to a rise in allergic and inflammatory diseases in the last half-century."*

For some, the answer to resolving food (and other) allergies is to "heal and seal" your intestines, which the GAPS nutritional program is designed to do. If you have severe food allergies, the [GAPS Introduction Diet](#), which uses [fermented foods](#) and other natural strategies, like [probiotics](#), to restore balance to your gut flora, may help heal your food allergy completely.

A comprehensive allergy program needs to address [optimizing your diet](#), intestinal health, and vitamin D levels while avoiding potential triggers. This includes a focus on fermented foods, high-fiber vegetables, and minimal processed foods and sugar. If fermented foods are not a regular part

