

Allergy in your baby

What is allergy?

Allergies are sensitive reactions that occur when the body's immune system reacts in any unusual way to foods, airborne dust, animal hair and pollens. This results in conditions such as hay fever, eczema, hives and bowel problems. The condition is also called *atopy*.

Allergies are common in babies and children. They usually disappear as the child grows older, but sometimes can continue into adult life.

Unlike most of the common illnesses (such as measles and chickenpox) an allergy can have many symptoms, and these vary widely from child to child. Allergies are not infectious.

How to tell if a baby has an allergy

An allergic reaction might take hours or even days to develop and can affect almost any part of the body. Symptoms may be any of the following:

1. *Digestive system (includes stomach and intestines)*: nausea, vomiting and spitting up of food, colicky behaviour in the young baby (including pulling away from the breast), stomach pain, diarrhoea, poor appetite, slow weight gain.
2. *Respiratory system (includes nose, throat and lungs)*: runny nose, sneezing, wheezing, asthma, recurring attacks of bronchitis or croup, persistent cough.
3. *Skin*: eczema, hives, other rashes.

What are the causes?

Common causes of allergic reaction are foods and airborne irritants. Soaps and detergents might aggravate some skin conditions.

- Foods that commonly cause allergic reactions include milk and other dairy products, eggs, peanut butter; sometimes oranges, soya beans, chocolate, tomatoes, fish and wheat.
- Airborne particles linked with allergic reactions include dust mites, pollens, animal hair and moulds.

Some reactions are caused by food additives such as colourings, flavourings and preservatives. Additives are found in many prepared foods (e.g. lollies, sauces, ice-cream, cordial, soft drinks, biscuits, savoury snacks and processed meats).

The allergic reaction to dairy products has almost the same symptoms (stomach pain and diarrhoea) as those that occur when a baby has *lactose intolerance*, which is when he or she cannot digest the sugar (lactose) in dairy products. The correct diagnosis is a matter for your doctor.

Is allergy inherited?

Allergy cannot be passed from generation to generation, but children from families that have a tendency to allergy have a greater chance of becoming allergic. However, anyone can become allergic.

What is the management?

Feeding

Breastfeeding of allergy-prone babies for the first 6 months might diminish eczema and other allergic disorders during infancy.

If breastfeeding is not possible, choose a breast milk substitute (formula) carefully. Get advice from your doctor or infant welfare nurse.

What happens when solids are introduced?

If possible, do not start solids until the baby is 5 or 6 months old. Start one food at a time, in small amounts. The quantity can be increased the next day if no reaction occurs.

New foods should be introduced at least several days apart. Particular care should be taken when starting foods that most commonly cause allergic reactions (dairy products, eggs, citrus fruits and peanut butter). They should be avoided during the first 6-9 months.

Be alert!

If possible, prepare the baby's food using fresh ingredients. For example, a child with cow's milk allergy should avoid cow's milk in any form. Read labels carefully to check ingredients in products.

Other allergies

Many babies and children develop allergies to house dust and animal hair. Vacuuming regularly and keeping pets outside will reduce the problem.

Bedding should be aired regularly. Damp and poorly ventilated homes are subject to mould, which can cause allergy. Both the mould and its cause should be eliminated.

Other things that can be done

- Cotton clothing is best for babies and children with skin problems.
- Avoid strong soaps, detergents and nappy wash solutions.
- Boil the baby's bottles rather than use chemical solutions.
- Use household chemicals such as strong fly sprays, perfumes and disinfectants sparingly, and air the house thoroughly afterwards.
- Do not smoke or allow others to smoke when your baby is in the room.