

MAIL TODAY

# Eating that could make you sick

BY MEGHANEN DUTTA LINGAM

**E**VER HAD a piece of chocolate and suddenly felt squirmy afterwards? Or munched on something as innocuous as a bowl of peanuts, and broken out into a rash? Most of us who experience discomfort after eating or drinking something generally ignore it or take some Digene to relieve our symptoms. But when the bloated sensation or nausea comes on every time you eat a certain food, you need to pay attention.

What you might be suffering from is food intolerance or allergy, an adverse reaction to certain foods or ingredients in food. Intolerance arises because the body lacks enzymes specifically needed to breakdown a particular food. Unassimilated food in the digestive system causes the classic symptoms of bloating and cramps. Doctors believe that about 2 per cent of people in India suffer from this condition, which goes largely undiagnosed. People are intolerant to many common foods such as milk, carbohydrates, wheat and certain preservatives. An allergy, on the other hand, occurs when the body's immune system reacts to a particular food as if it were a threat. Skin eruptions (rash, swelling, hives) and choking are common symptoms. At times these can be life-threatening, requiring emergency medical attention. Some of the common foods that cause allergy include celery, shell fish including crabs and prawns, eggs, fish, molluscs, mustard, nuts, sesame seeds and even soya.

**TROUBLESOME FOODS**

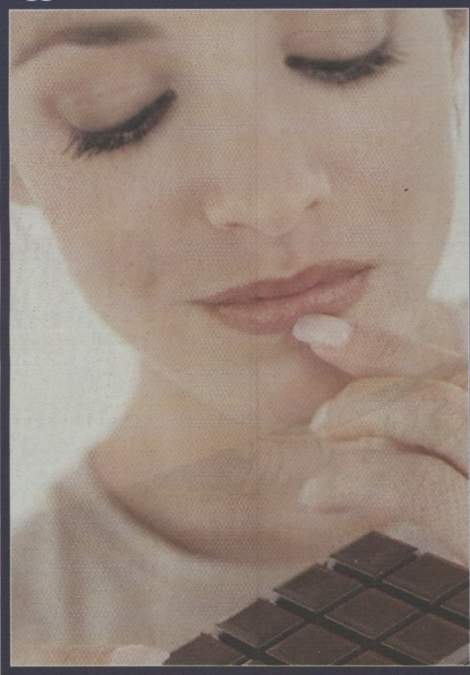
**M**ANY people are unable to digest foods like milk, wheat, barley and rye. This food intolerance is rarely harmful but causes unpleasant symptoms. Lactose intolerance — which makes it difficult to drink milk or eat milk products — is also fairly common. "There is a shortage of the enzyme lactase, normally produced by the cells lining the small intestine. So the body can't break down milk sugar into simpler forms that can be absorbed into the bloodstream," says Dr K.M Singh, senior consultant, internal medicine, Fortis hospital.

For most people, lactose deficiency develops with age as the small intestine gradually loses the ability to produce lactase. This intolerance can cause symptoms very similar to irritable bowel syndrome.

Another sugar that commonly causes reactions is fructose, found in fruits like figs, pears, prunes, and grapes. Corn syrup which is used to sweeten gums, candies and sodas also contains this. Diet food and beverages, and even some low calorie gums are sweetened with sugars such as sorbitol, mannitol and xylitol which are poorly absorbed by most people. Sugars that are not absorbed in the small intestine pass into the large intestine where bacteria feed on them and produce gas and other by-products leading to discomfort. Another common problem is Celiac disease, caused by intolerance to the protein gluten found in wheat, rye and barley. Alcohol intolerance may also occur due to the deficiency of the enzyme alcohol dehydrogenase. Those with this problem will feel unwell even if they drink a very small amount of alcohol.

Food intolerance causes gastrointestinal symptoms, which include bloating, abdominal cramps, diarrhoea, vomiting and constipation. Skin eruptions and

Many people are intolerant or allergic to common foods such as chocolate, eggs and the MSG in a Chinese meal



respiratory symptoms occur less often. "Symptoms manifest differently in people. For some it could take 30 minutes and for others it could take a few hours. Reactions may even manifest over a period of 3 — 5 days, the severity of which depends on the amount of food eaten," says Dr Singh.

People who suffer from food intolerance may lose weight easily and even become malnourished.

**ALLERGY VS INTOLERANCE**

**Y**OU MIGHT thoroughly enjoy your favourite chilly chicken at your favourite Chinese joint, but be on the look out for uneasy symptoms. An inevitable ingredient in Chinese food — monosodium glutamate (MSG) — is the cause of many reactions. Allergy to Chinese food can lead to headaches, chest tightness, nausea, sweating, burning neck and facial pressure.

Food intolerance is different from food allergy. An allergic reaction to food develops with even the minutest quantity of the food and the symptoms manifest almost immediately, unlike a reaction to intolerance, which may take hours or days. In adults, most allergic reactions

are to peanuts, shellfish and wheat. In children, the commonest culprits are eggs, milk, nuts, soya and wheat. Usually children grow out of most types of food allergy in early childhood. A skin or respiratory symptom to an allergy will subside by discontinuing the food immediately. In the case of intolerance since the reaction is gastrointestinal, it can have long-term health implications.

Some people have adverse reactions to chemical preservatives and additives such as sulphites, benzoates, salicylates, aspartame and tartrazine found in food and beverages and also in medications, cosmetics and many dyes. Wheezing may develop in response to ingestion of sulfites found on pesticide sprayed vegetables and fruit. Some many even be allergic to chocolates, caffeine and even a glass of wine! These and various additives have been suggested as agents that worsen migraines and attention deficit hyperactive disorder in some individuals.

**DIAGNOSIS IS CRUCIAL**

**D**OCTORS suggest that the easiest test for food intolerance is to remove the culprit food from your diet, see if symptoms

improve and then try reintroducing the food to see if symptoms return. An accurate diagnosis of food intolerance is important to stay in good health and also prevent a more serious underlying disease from being diagnosed. "There are many ELISA based blood tests that test for antibodies specific to the food in question. But these have to be recommended by a doctor," says Dr Monika Mahajan, internal medicine specialist, Max Healthcare.

A new highly sensitive test has been introduced in the market by Super Religare that tests intolerance to 250 varieties of food. "This is a comprehensive test based on the IgG technology which can reveal intolerance to many foods all in one go," says Dr Sanjeev Chaudhury, CEO, Super Religare Ltd.

While there is no treatment for food intolerance, excluding the food you are sensitive to and substituting it with another having similar nutritive value is the only solution.

"It's important that if foods are excluded from the diet, suitable alternatives are introduced to avoid nutrient deficiencies," adds Dr Mahajan.

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