

Food Allergies and Illness

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Do food allergies and intolerance play a significant role in many health conditions that on the surface may appear completely unrelated? Many complimentary and alternative health practitioners are increasingly discovering that they do. Conventional medicine has long recognized obvious allergies causing reactions like hives and rashes from foods such as peanuts and strawberries as well as severe intolerance to the substance called gluten that is found in many cereal grains, especially wheat, which presents as a disease called celiac sprue. What has been less well acknowledged are subtler reactions that may play a role in such conditions as arthritis, asthma, chronic sinusitis, migraine headaches, eczema, and even attention deficit disorder and auto-immune diseases like lupus.

Part of the problem may lie in the fact that there appear to be a number of different mechanisms involved. Classic food allergy reactions like hives and acute wheezing, as well as immediate stomach reactions, occur as a result of an antibody reaction similar to what happens with pollen and animal dander exposure in susceptible people. This is called Type I hypersensitivity in medical parlance and is what shows up on typical allergy tests, like the scratch test performed by an allergist or the common blood testing known as RAST testing. Gluten intolerant people also frequently have a positive blood test for the antibody to a protein called alpha-gliadin. There are three other types of reactions, appropriately called Types II, III, and IV that are not typically looked at and many people think that these are involved in the less obvious food reactions. The type IV reaction in particular may be related to a whole host of problems, especially inflammatory conditions. This is called cellular hypersensitivity because it involves white blood cells called lymphocytes and can take up to 48 hours to show up, thus producing a challenge when trying to nail down the culprits for each individual. A few specialized labs can perform blood testing for this but it can be quite expensive and may not be covered by health insurance.

While it is not completely clear what causes people to become allergic to food in this way, one of the most attractive theories is the leaky gut hypothesis. As a result of imbalances of acid and enzymes and abnormal growth of bacteria in the intestines, which themselves are caused by poor diet, stress, and drugs like antibiotics, birth control pills and cortisone, a situation is created where the intestinal lining appears to become leaky. That means that proteins and large molecules that are normally kept from passing through the wall of the gut now appear to pass right through. Waiting for them is a large part of the immune system, in the form of lymphocytes, which lie in the wall of the intestine. Since these molecules normally do not get through, the immune system appears to see them as foreign thus initiating an immune response. Repeated exposure then puts the whole immune system in overdrive, causing chronic inflammation, with

resultant problems that can crop up anywhere in the body, such as those listed earlier.

The foods that seem to be the most common offenders are frequently those to which human beings have only been exposed to for a shorter period of time, at least by the evolutionary clock. These include the cereal grains, like wheat, and dairy products, like milk that humans have only been eating for around 10,000 years as opposed to things like meat, vegetables, and nuts and seeds that we have been eating for hundreds of thousands of years. The thinking here is that our genes have not had as much time to adapt to these foods so they are the first ones we will lose the ability to properly digest if conditions are not right. They certainly have not had enough time to adapt to the processed foods that we have only been eating for 50-100 years.

Anyone with a significant health problem, as well as those listed above, should consider looking into food allergies as a possible contributing cause. One of the best ways to do this is to try a diagnostic and therapeutic trial of an elimination diet where you avoid all of the commonly offending foods like wheat, dairy, corn, citrus fruits, and eggs completely for a period of time. Frequently, if food allergies are involved, you will see a difference in your symptoms in 2-3 weeks, although with more serious problems it can take up to several months. Then you can add back foods one at a time to see which ones make things worse. While this requires planning and effort, it is cheap and has no side effects. If that sounds like too much, you can try one or two foods at a time, like just wheat and/or dairy to see if it makes a difference. As an interesting sidelight, it is the experience of many nutritional practitioners that about 15% of arthritis patients get better if they stop eating any of the nightshade family of vegetables, which includes white potatoes, tomatoes, bell peppers, and eggplants.

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