



EGGS



GMO



GLUTEN



SUGAR



PEANUTS



CORN



MILK



SOY



TRANS FATS

Food Sensitivities—Breaking Down the Basics!

By Holly Niles, MS, CNS, LDN, CFSP

We hear a lot about food sensitivities nowadays, with so many people avoiding one or multiple foods in their daily diets. Often, people cite food allergies, sensitivities, intolerances and/or reactivity as to the reason why they avoid certain foods.

Let's start with a look at an example of our immune system and the way it defends us to keep us healthy. One of the key jobs of our immune system is to evaluate everything that comes into our body as either friend or foe. For example, when we get a cold/flu our nose can get congested and runny. The congestion is an example of the body's response to germs. These germs that come into our body are like foreign invaders. The immune system wants to capture them and remove them from our body. Mucous can actually perform this job very effectively, although not always pleasant to experience. This type of response is exactly what we want the body to be able to do—to be on the watch for things that could harm us.

With that in mind, let's look at some of the basic definitions about the ways we can react to foods and how our immune system plays a role.

Ways we react to foods

Food Allergies: A rapid immune response which is why they are often life-threatening (for example, peanuts, tree nuts or shellfish allergies are some common food allergies).

Food Sensitivities: A slow forming immune response which makes them more difficult to pin down (soy, dairy, and gluten can fall into both this category as well as the allergy category).

Food Intolerances: Non-immune reaction to food (e.g. lactose intolerance which means you don't digest the "sugar" of dairy in the form of lactose or MSG as a flavor enhancer/additive).

An allergy is commonly diagnosed by your primary care doctor or an allergy specialist doctor like an immunologist. Food allergies have quick responses or reactions in the body like itching, pain or difficulty breathing after a small amount of the food.

Food sensitivities can be harder to determine. They take longer to present and can impact the body in a number of ways. Some of these types of reactions include: digestive challenges such as bloating/constipation/nausea, sneezing, joint pain, hives, fatigue, irritability and even brain fog.

When we speak about the immune system in reference to food, we're talking more specifically about the "gut". We know that about 70% of our immune system lives in the gut and it's actually the gate or barrier where our digested foods cross into our blood stream for

the body to utilize. The impact of food as a possible immune challenge is significant as we don't want our immune system having a reaction to food. Many people have autoimmune diseases and other imbalances that are connected to a lack of immune health. Since we eat every day and often, several times per day, it's so important to know what/if foods are a challenge for our body. If we continually eat something that the body sees as a foe, especially when our immune system is already challenged, that can create a problem for the body.

Why do more people have challenges with food sensitivities and allergies?

New York Times bestselling author Dr. Mark Hyman writes in his books and on his website about this increase in reactivity and why we are seeing such an increase today.

Here are some of the reasons:

- 1. Processed food:** Our American diet has more processed foods with additives and chemicals which are seen as toxins or foreign invaders and can change the environment of our "gut", making us more sensitive.
- 2. Antibiotics:** Research shows that antibiotics have been used too often to treat illness. Antibiotics work to kill "bad bugs" in our gut but they also kill "good bugs" that are the foundation of our immune system. This can change the landscape of our gut and make it more permeable. The increase allows our body to be more reactive to foods.
- 3. Poor digestion:** We need to break our food down thoroughly in our digestive tract so it can be absorbed and utilized in our body. Poor digestion including low stomach acid combined with over-use of antibiotics can lead to more reactions from food.
- 4. Food allergies:** People who have food allergies are more likely to have food sensitivities. Sometimes it can take time to isolate allergies and we can have more than one in varying degrees.
- 5. Stress:** The gut is sometimes referred to as our second brain because of the nervous system that lives there. Chronic stress causes our body to secrete stress chemicals on a regular basis. This process wears down our immune system and makes us more susceptible to food sensitivities.

How do you proceed if you think you may have food sensitivities?

The gold standard to determining sensitivities is an elimination diet where you avoid the suspected foods for at least 3 weeks and up to 4-6 weeks. The most common reactive foods are: gluten, dairy, eggs, soy, peanut and corn. Other possibilities are nightshade vegetables, nuts and citrus, especially for those with inflammatory conditions. Avoiding these foods for the designated time will allow the immune system to reduce its reactivity.

Some people notice improvement in how they feel shortly after removing the food; for other people, it can take a few weeks to see improvements. In the environment of an elimination diet it's also important to avoid processed foods, support digestion by chewing well and eating calmly and overall reducing stress. It's best to set the elimination diet in an overall healthy lifestyle to help get the clearest feedback from your body.

During this elimination diet, symptoms can reduce or go away entirely. Clients often wonder if they have to avoid the food forever. That depends on your overall health and how reactive you might be. There is a process of reintroduction to determine if the food is a challenge for you. After you have avoided the food for the designated time you may want to consider reintroducing the food. To do this, it's optimal to add the food back in a small portion in the morning and then if that feels okay, you can double the portion later in the day and see how you feel. Then wait at least 48 hours before you add any other reactive foods. This process can provide valuable information about your body's reactivity to foods.

It is common for people to experiment with avoiding a few foods to see if they feel better or different without eating them. You may have noticed that there are a lot more books and resources available today to walk you through this process. Here are a few books that might be helpful: *The UltraSimple Diet*, by Mark Hyman, M.D.; *Wheat Belly*, by William Davis, M.D; and *Grain Brain*, by David Perlmutter, M.D. Dietary changes are very helpful and you still may need more support beyond the elimination diet.

A good resource for additional support are Functional Medicine and Integrative practitioners. They can offer more support, appropriate nutritional supplements and additional testing methods to help you get your body back into balance and regain your health.

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several years as part of the nutrition team at Dr. Mark Hyman's Ultra Wellness Center in Lenox, MA. Her approach is to help patients find practical ways to enjoy making healthy changes to create wellness. She believes that not only is our food a key to creating a well-being but that our food is our medicine.