



HOLISTIC WELLNESS EDUCATION

DISTINGUISHING ALLERGIES FROM INTOLERANCES

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

An allergy occurs when the immune system reacts to a substance that is usually harmless, such as pollen, a food protein, or animal dander. An intolerance is a nonallergic reaction, often involving difficulty digesting or processing a substance. Both allergies and intolerances can cause digestive symptoms, but their mechanisms and risks differ. Milk illustrates the distinction: milk allergy involves an immune reaction to milk proteins, whereas lactose intolerance involves difficulty digesting lactose, the sugar in milk.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BODY?

The immune system normally recognizes threats while tolerating harmless substances. In many immediate allergies, it produces immunoglobulin E (IgE) – antibodies that recognize a particular allergen. These antibodies attach to mast cells, immune cells found in the skin, airways, and digestive tract. When the allergen encounters these antibodies, mast cells release histamine and other chemical messengers. Histamine increases fluid leakage from small blood vessels and stimulates nerves, contributing to swelling, itching, and mucus production. Other messengers can narrow airways. Some allergies involve different immune pathways and develop more slowly. Intolerances work differently. With lactose intolerance, insufficient lactase (a digestive enzyme) leaves lactose incompletely digested. It then draws water into the intestine and is fermented by bacteria, producing diarrhea, gas, and bloating.

CAUSES & CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Allergies reflect an interaction between inherited susceptibility and environmental exposures. A family history of allergic disease increases risk, but does not determine which allergy someone develops. Allergies can begin in adulthood. Intolerances may arise from inherited digestive differences, age-related changes in enzyme production, or intestinal injury. Symptoms often depend on the amount consumed. Allergic reactions can occur with very small exposures, and a previously mild reaction does not guarantee future reactions will remain mild.

SIGNS, SYMPTOMS, EFFECTS

Allergies may cause sneezing, itchy eyes, hives, swelling, vomiting, or wheezing. Immediate food-allergic reactions usually begin within minutes to a few hours; other allergic reactions can be delayed. Intolerances commonly cause bloating, cramps, gas, or diarrhea. These symptoms overlap with other digestive conditions, so symptoms alone cannot establish the cause. Anaphylaxis is a potentially life-threatening allergic reaction – breathing difficulty, throat swelling, or faintness after exposure requires emergency care.

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