



When food turns foe

SHILPI A SINGH explores the dangers of common food allergies

Earlier this month, when singer Sonu Nigam took to Instagram to share two pictures of himself — one a selfie showing his eye swollen and shut, the other of him lying on a hospital bed wearing an oxygen mask — he left his fans gasping, as he alerted all on how bad a food allergy could get. Sonu had a severe allergic reaction to seafood, following which he was rushed to Nanavati Super Speciality Hospital in Mumbai. Though he was back on his feet in no time, all thanks to timely intervention, he doled out a million dollar advice that holds true for all and sundry — one must never ever take a chance with allergies. Giving a rundown of food allergy, Dr

Sandeep Patil, Chief Intensivist and Physician, Fortis Hospital, Kalyan, says, "The body's immune systems keep you healthy by combating infections and other dangers to one's good health. A 'food allergy reaction' occurs when your immune system over-responds to a type of food or an ingredient in the food, identifying it as a danger, thereby triggering a protective response."

Allergy triggers

Even a tiny amount of the allergy-causing food can trigger signs and symptoms related to digestive or respiratory system. "Food allergy affects 6-8% of children under 3 and up to 3% of adults. There is no cure for food allergy, but some children outgrow their food allergy as they get older. The most common food allergies for children are egg, milk, peanuts, fish, wheat and soy and account for 90% of all allergies. Whereas in adults the most common food allergy is of shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts and fish," says Ritika

Samaddar Regional Head-Department of Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics, Max Healthcare Super Speciality Hospital.

A food allergy will usually cause some sort of reaction every time the 'trigger' food is consumed. Symptoms can range from mild to severe, and severity may vary from person to person. Allergic reactions to food can influence the skin, respiratory tract, gastrointestinal tract and cardiovascular system. Dr Usha Kiran Sisodia, Clinical Nutritionist and Head Dietician at Nanavati Super Speciality Hospital, Mumbai, says, "The symptoms include breathlessness, choking, severe burning, inflammation, and palpitation. Sometimes other conditions include skin rash, runny nose, itchy eyes, nausea, stomach cramps also appear, while anaphylactic reaction may be life-threatening and requires prompt treatment."

Deadly reactions

Breaking down anaphylaxis, Samaddar says, "It is a life-threatening reaction that

can impair breathing, cause a drop in blood pressure and affect heart rate. Anaphylaxis can come within minutes of exposure to the trigger food. It can be fatal and must be treated promptly with an injection of epinephrine." Dr Patil adds that "it is not possible to predict how severe the next reaction would be, and all patients with food allergies should be carefully counselled about the risk of anaphylaxis."

To make a diagnosis, Dr Patil suggests that detailed questions about the patient's medical history and symptoms need to be taken. "The most important ones are what and how much did that person eat, how long did it take for symptoms to develop, what symptoms did that person experience, and how long did they last. The tests to be conducted include skin prick



— Ritika Samaddar

“ One must know what one is eating and drinking. If one already has had a severe reaction, wear a medical alert bracelet that lets others know that one has a food allergy. Visit a clinical nutritionist or dietician for a diet plan.”

Senior Dietician Ritika Sehgal.

It is possible to have more than one food intolerance, and it is possible to have both severe and mild food intolerances. "Treating food intolerance generally means removing the offending food from your diet, although there are over the counter medications that may help with some symptoms. Types of intolerance include lactose, gluten and histamine," says Sehgal.

Food intolerance can be difficult to diagnose, and the symptoms overlap with a variety of other conditions, including those of true food allergy and celiac disease (both of which require medical attention). "The symptoms of food allergy develop soon after consuming the food while those of food intolerance take 12 to 24 hours to show. Food intolerance reactions are usually related to the amount of food consumed. They may not occur till a certain amount of the food is eaten, but this amount varies for each person," says Sehgal, adding, "Therefore, it is important to discuss symptoms with your doctor who might advise further tests or keep a food diary to get an accurate diagnosis."

Treatment & cure

Food allergy can be cured and prevented but depends on the how early one came to know and how soon the treatment started and also one's body reaction and the type of diet one is taking. "To ascertain if a person is allergic to a particular kind of food, one must use the elimination diet, and try eating immune booster foods and balanced meals," advises Dr Sisodia.

The primary way to manage a food allergy, Samaddar suggests, carefully checking ingredient labels of food products, and learning whether what you need to avoid is known by other names. "One must know what one is eating and drinking. If one already has had a severe reaction, wear a medical alert bracelet that lets others know that one has a food allergy. Be careful at restaurants so that any food one is allergic too should not be part of the meal. Visit a clinical nutritionist or dietician for a diet plan," adds Samaddar.

