

Medical News & Perspectives

Quick Uptakes

Food Allergies: Not Just Kid Stuff

Rita Rubin, MA

A recent *JAMA Network Open* article grabbed headlines for suggesting that half of adults who think they have a food allergy probably don't. But lead author Ruchi Gupta, MD, MPH, says the study has another important message.

Behind the Headlines

Studies suggest some children **outgrow allergies** to certain foods. But far less is known about how often and why some people grow into food allergies in adulthood, said Gupta, a pediatrician who directs the Science & Outcomes of Allergy & Asthma Research (SOAAR) Program based at the Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital and Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine.

"I don't know of any literature that's really discussed adult-onset allergies," she said. "We think that this is something new that this article brought out."

Gupta's research suggests that food allergies are more common among adults than among children. Based on the results of a **study** she recently coauthored, an estimated 7.6% of US children and teens 17 years or younger have food allergies. But in her *JAMA Network Open* study, 10.8% of adults—a prevalence rate about 40% higher than in children—had convincing evidence of food allergy such as hives, trouble breathing, or tongue swelling.

"There are so many kids who are keeping their allergies, and then you start to see adults acquiring a new one," Gupta explained.

Statistically Speaking

Gupta and her coauthors surveyed 40 443 adults to assess the prevalence and severity of food allergies. Their findings showed:



- About 19% of survey respondents reported having a food allergy, but only 10.8% had convincing symptoms.
- Nearly half (48%) of those with food allergies said they developed at least 1 as an adult. Although most people with adult-onset food allergy had other food allergies in childhood, more than a quarter (27%) said they never did.
- The most common allergy was to shellfish, followed by milk, peanut, tree nut, and fish other than shellfish.
- Nearly half (45.3%) of people with a food allergy were allergic to multiple foods.
- Of those who appeared to be truly allergic, only 24% reported having a current epinephrine prescription, and 38.3% reported at least 1 food allergy-related emergency department visit in their lifetime.

Questions Without Answers

No one knows why some adults develop food allergies. "I think that's the biggest question that the whole study brings up," Gupta said.

After all, people's genetics don't change as they age, she noted, suggesting that environmental factors play a role.

Gupta said she and her coauthors are planning to analyze survey respondents' answers to questions about changes in their health or environment that could have triggered their adult-onset food allergy.

"Did they move, especially from one country to another? Any recent infections?" The latter question was designed to get at whether antibiotic therapy could have compromised their immune system, Gupta explained.

Another theory is that hormonal changes, namely those during puberty and pregnancy, could be related to the onset of food allergies, while the hormonal changes of menopause could be related to their resolution, she said.

In line with the possible involvement of hormones, the rate of convincing food allergy was nearly twice as high in women (13.8%) as it was in men (7.5%) in Gupta's study of adults. Meanwhile, the rate among people 60 years and older (8.8%) was lower than that among people ages 30 to 39 years (12.7%).

"There's not a ton of data out there, but these are the theories," Gupta said.

The Upshot

"It is important to get a right diagnosis," Gupta said. "I don't want people taking food out of their diet" if they don't have to. ■

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.