

How Can I Tell If My Baby Has Food Allergies?

Signs and Symptoms of Allergies in Babies

Food allergies can be hard to spot in babies. The only way to know for sure if your child has a food allergy is to get a formal diagnosis from a healthcare provider.

That said, there are some signs and symptoms of food allergies that you may recognize.



Some of these can be mild and, on their own, seemingly non-specific. For example, babies can experience nasal stuffiness, skin itching, or coughing as the result of a food allergy. But other symptoms, like difficulty breathing, can be severe and require emergency care.

In this article, you'll learn the symptoms to watch for, how to recognize them in your baby, and what's considered mild or severe. You'll also learn how long it takes for symptoms to occur and how to prevent allergic reactions in your child.

Can Any Baby Have a Food Allergy?

Yes. However, babies with a close family member with a food allergy are at higher risk for developing one themselves. It's especially important to watch for signs in these children. About 3% of infants and almost 9% of 1-year-olds are allergic to at least one food.¹

A child can have a reaction from eating a problematic food or from consuming breast milk that contains proteins from the food, which come from a mother's diet. Thankfully, most food allergy reactions are mild. However, some can be severe and require immediate medical attention.

Body Part	Symptoms	Severe?
Eyes	Itching, watering, swelling	No
Nose	Stuffy, runny, itchy, sneezing	No
Mouth	Swelling, itching	No
Throat	Hoarseness, coughing, swelling	Sometimes
Lungs	Difficulty breathing, wheezing	Yes
Heart	Low blood pressure, pale skin, loss of consciousness	Yes
Digestion	Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, reflux, diarrhea	No
Skin	Itching, eczema, hives, swelling	No

Mild Signs and Symptoms of Food Allergy

Food allergies can cause a lot of symptoms. If a child is too young to tell you what's going on, you may not know about some of them at all. Other symptoms may be noticeable but have plenty of other potential causes, making them easy to chalk them up to something else entirely.

The key is to take note of what symptoms tend to happen together and whether they come on soon after eating.

Colic

Colic isn't a specific illness or diagnosis. It's a descriptive term that means your baby cries inconsolably for at least three hours a day, three days a week, for at least three weeks.

It's usually a predictable pattern. You can recognize a colic spell by its symptoms:²

- High-pitched crying
- Difficulty being soothed
- Red face, possibly with pale skin around the mouth
- Pulled-up legs, stiffened arms, clenched fists, or arched back

While a food allergy may cause colic, so can several other things. These include being overstimulated, an inability to self-soothe, or a digestive problem. There's no way to distinguish allergy-related colic from any other type of colic. Instead, pay attention to any other symptoms that may occur along with it.

Itching

A food allergy can cause itching all over. But a baby won't be able to show it in the way that you do. Before they're old enough to be able to scratch an itch, an itchy baby may squirm in an attempt to rub the itchy spot against something. They may also be fussy.⁴

Again, a suspected itch isn't enough to suggest a food allergy. But it's an important part of the whole picture.

Eczema



Swelling of the Face, Lips, and Eyes

Your baby may take on a “puffy” look in their face, especially in the lips and around the eyes, if they are having an allergic reaction to a food. This is called [angioedema](#).

Treating the allergy with antihistamines should help the angioedema go away. Without treatment, the swelling will likely go away within a few days. This symptom is considered mild unless your baby also has swelling in the tongue and throat.

Preventing Allergic Reactions

If you don't have allergies, it's not necessary to avoid possible food allergens during pregnancy. There's no evidence doing so prevents allergies in the baby. The best way to minimize your baby's risk of allergic reactions is to breastfeed. It's the least likely thing to trigger a reaction. However, if your baby appears to have a reaction to your breast milk, it may be because they're allergic to proteins from food you've eaten that are passed on through your milk.

Breastfeeding for between 4 and 6 months may also reduce your baby's risk of eczema, wheezing, and an allergy to cow's milk. Once your baby is between 4 and 6 months old, introduce solid foods with single ingredients, like apple or squash baby food, or rice cereal.

Space out new foods by a few days. Then if your baby does have a reaction, it's easy to figure out what food is the problem. Some people wait to give their baby higher-risk foods like eggs and peanuts, but experts say delaying exposure to those foods may actually increase their risk of food allergies.

Once you know your baby is allergic to something, the best way to prevent a reaction is to diligently avoid the problem food(s) and anything that could contain them or have come in contact with them.

Summary

About 3% of infants have food allergies and about 9% of 1-year-olds. Symptoms appear quickly after eating foods such as milk, eggs, nuts, and fish. Mild symptoms can include colic, eczema, hives, and runny nose.

Severe reactions (anaphylaxis) happen within two hours. Anaphylaxis involves wheezing or difficulty breathing, mouth and throat swelling, and possibly loss of consciousness. Anaphylaxis is always an emergency that requires immediate medical attention.

You can prevent allergies by breastfeeding. Introducing single-ingredient foods one at a time can help you associate reactions with their causes.