Could you be suffering from a food sensitivity, food allergy, or food intolerance? If you've been experiencing problems, one of these conditions could be to blame. To determine what might be ailing you, it's important to understand what the terms mean.

According to many experts, food sensitivity is the broad term that includes both food allergy and food intolerance. A food allergy involves the immune system. If you eat shellfish or tree nuts or peanuts and end up in the emergency room covered with hives and struggling to breathe, you have a food allergy. Antibodies called Immunoglobulin E (IgE) cause these immediate reactions. Less than two percent of adults have this form of food allergy while up to eight percent of children under five have food allergies.

But suppose every time you consume dairy products you experience significant arthritis pain several days later? Or, every time you eat chicken you develop a migraine headache many hours later? Most physicians do not consider this a true food allergy, but delayed reactions to foods can still cause distress. More people suffer from these delayed reactions than from the immediate ones.

Gluten intolerance is more in the news these days as awareness grows that many more have the problem than once was thought. In fact, about one in a hundred is affected by the condition. Gluten is the storage protein of wheat. Rye and barley have similar proteins. These proteins are resistant to digestion, leaving toxic fragments that get into the lining of the intestine. Susceptible people develop an immunological reaction to these fragments that creates inflammation. Anemia, depression, osteoporosis, and migraine headaches have now been linked with gluten intolerance while diarrhea, the most widely known symptom, is not always present.

Lactose intolerance is another common form of food sensitivity. Most of the world's population experiences a gradual loss of lactase after weaning. People whose ancestors came from northern Europe have the lowest incidence (less than 20%) while more than 80% of other ethnic groups have some intolerance of lactose.

Both gluten intolerance and lactose intolerance suggest that humans were not originally designed to consume wheat and milk. These foods are relatively late additions to the diet and coincided with the start of agriculture and animal husbandry. Some individuals can be intolerant of artificial additions to the food supply such as colorings, flavorings, and sweeteners. Examples of these are tartrazine, MSG (monosodium glutamate), and aspartame. Still others can be intolerant of preservatives such as benzoates and sulfites.

As much as 50% of the adult population can experience these reactions that do not involve the immune system. If you believe you have a food allergy or food sensitivity, you may want to make an appointment with one of Elliot Hospital’s outpatient dietitians or attend a nutritional supermarket tour at one of three local Hannafords.

For more information:
- Dr. Braly’s Food Allergy and Nutrition Revolution, James Braly, MD
- Celiac Disease: A Hidden Epidemic, Peter H.R. Green, MD, and Rory Jones
- Dealing with Food Allergies — Janice Vickerstaff Joneja, PhD, RDN

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