

Reducing Risk of Food Allergy in Your Baby: A resource for parents of babies at increased risk of food allergy

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy occurs when the immune system mistakes a particular food as harmful. Once a person has developed a food allergy, an allergic reaction occurs every time the food is eaten.

Children can outgrow some food allergies. In adults, food allergies are more often permanent. About 5% of babies and young children have food allergies and about 3-4% of adults have food allergies.

Is my baby at increased risk of food allergies?

Allergic conditions tend to run in families. A baby is at increased risk of food allergies if a doctor has ever diagnosed a parent, sister or brother with an allergic condition like food allergy, eczema, asthma or hay fever.

Discuss your family history with your doctor to find out if your baby is at increased risk.

What are some possible symptoms of food allergies in babies?

Symptoms of food allergies can range from mild to severe. Reactions often appear within minutes after exposure to the food. Examples include:

- Hives, swelling, redness and rash.
- Stuffy or runny nose with itchy watery eyes.

Although it is less common, symptoms such as vomiting, sometimes combined with diarrhea, can also occur hours later.

Severe symptoms of food allergy require immediate attention. Examples include:

- Swelling of the mouth, tongue and throat.
- Hives that are spreading.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Difficulty swallowing or hoarse voice.
- Pale or blue colour of the face or lips.
- Faintness, weakness or passing out.

Call 911 or the local emergency number right away if signs of a severe allergic reaction occur.

If you are concerned a food is causing an allergic reaction, stop giving the food and talk to your baby's doctor. You can give other new foods.

What is the connection between eczema and food allergies?

Most babies with mild eczema do not have food allergies. Some babies who have *moderate* to *severe* eczema do have food allergies, but this does not mean that a food allergy has caused their eczema. Instead, genetic factors seem to be the major cause of eczema. Having eczema may increase risk for food allergies. Keeping eczema under good control might help prevent food allergies. For more information about managing eczema, talk to your baby's doctor.

Your doctor can refer your baby to a pediatric allergist or pediatric dermatologist if help with a diagnosis or a treatment plan is needed.



Steps you can take

Here are some steps that might help reduce the risk of allergic conditions in babies at increased risk, as well as some general suggestions for keeping babies healthy.

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This information is not meant to replace advice from your medical doctor or individual counseling with a registered dietitian. It is intended for educational and informational purposes only.

Eat a healthy diet while you are pregnant.

You do not need to avoid foods while you are pregnant to prevent food allergies in your baby. Restricting foods could make it hard for your unborn baby to grow well. Eating a healthy diet that includes a variety of foods from "Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide"

www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide will help your baby grow and be healthy.

Breastfeed your baby.

Exclusive breastfeeding for 4 to 6 months or longer may help prevent food allergies in babies who are at increased risk, but more research is required to prove whether or not this is true.

Health Canada recommends exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months of age for all healthy term babies for health reasons other than the prevention of allergic conditions. Breast milk and a vitamin D supplement provide all the nutrition your baby needs during this time.

Should I avoid certain foods while breastfeeding?

You do not need to avoid specific foods while you breastfeed to prevent food allergies in your baby. Current research has not shown that avoiding specific foods while breastfeeding prevents allergic conditions in babies.

Choose the right infant formula.

Formula feeding is recommended only if you cannot breastfeed. If you are having trouble breastfeeding or are concerned that you do not have enough breast milk, contact your doctor, midwife, public health nurse or lactation consultant. If you need to use formula, consider a modified infant formula during the first 4 to 6 months of life. Modified formulas may reduce the risk of eczema in babies who are at increased risk of allergic conditions when compared to regular cow milk-based or soy-based formulas.

Consider these modified infant formulas:

- Extensively hydrolyzed casein formula. The brand names available in Canada are Nutramigen® and Alimentum®.
- Partially hydrolyzed whey formula. The brand name available in Canada is Good Start®.

An extensively hydrolyzed casein formula is likely more effective for eczema prevention compared to partially hydrolyzed whey formula.

Formula prices vary. It is all right to choose the formula that best fits your family budget.

If you need to supplement your breast milk after 4 to 6 months of age, you can offer regular cow's milk-based formula to your baby.

For more information about infant formulas and allergy prevention, contact a registered dietitian or your baby's doctor.

Avoid unnecessary delays when introducing solid foods.

In the past, some health professionals recommended delaying the introduction of fish and eggs and foods that contain milk, peanuts and tree nuts to help reduce the risk of allergies to these foods, but this practice has not proved to be effective. Research does not show that delaying these foods for longer than 4 to 6 months prevents food allergies.

For health reasons other than the prevention of allergic conditions, Health Canada recommends waiting until 6 months of age before offering solid foods. At 6 months, your baby is ready for solid foods and needs more iron and other nutrients.

What foods should I offer first?

Start with iron-fortified infant cereals and cooked, tender, finely minced meat, fish and poultry. They are good sources of iron. Add new foods one at a time. If your baby tolerates a new food, continue to offer it.

Wait a few days before adding each new food. Continue to introduce other new foods. At 1 year, your baby should be eating a variety of foods and can eat many family meals. For more information about giving solid foods to your baby, speak with a registered dietitian or your baby's doctor and refer to the "Additional Resources" section below.

If you smoke, stop smoking.

Smoking or being around second-hand smoke while you are pregnant increases your child's risk of breathing problems. Exposing your baby to second-hand smoke after birth also increases risk. Stop smoking and make your home smoke free during your pregnancy and afterwards. To help quit smoking, you can contact Quitnow at 8-1-1 or visit www.quitnow.ca.



Additional Resources

HealthLinkBC www.healthlinkbc.ca/. Medically approved non-emergency health information and advice.

- HealthLinkBC File #69c Baby's First Foods
www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile69c.stm
- HealthLinkBC File #69d Helping Your Toddler to Eat Well: Sharing the Responsibility with Your One to Three-Year-Old
www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile69d.stm
- Eczema and food allergy in babies and young children
www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian/pdf/eczema-and-food-allergy-in-babies-and-young-children.pdf

BC Ministry of Health Resources:

- Baby's Best Chance
www.hls.gov.bc.ca/publications/year/2010/bbc.pdf
- Toddler's First Steps: 6-36 months
[www.hls.gov.bc.ca/publications/year/2009/Toddlers first steps 2e d.pdf](http://www.hls.gov.bc.ca/publications/year/2009/Toddlers_first_steps_2e_d.pdf)

Government of Canada, "The Sensible Guide to a Healthy Pregnancy"
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hp-gs/guide-eng.php.

QuitNow www.QuitNow.ca
or call 8-1-1 to get help quitting smoking.

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Notes

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