



Understanding Peanut Allergies

If your child has been diagnosed with a peanut allergy, it can strike fear into your heart. But if your child is eating peanuts with no reaction and receives a positive test result, there are other factors you need to consider before your family becomes peanut-free.

What is a true peanut allergy?

Peanut allergy is one of many types of food allergy. It causes an abnormal response by the body to peanuts or peanut products. These responses can range from mild skin rashes to severe breathing problems to shock. About 25 percent of the time, an allergic reaction occurs the first time your child is exposed to the food. However, it is more likely to occur the second time. Allergies are an overreaction of the body's natural defense system that normally fights infections, causing symptoms from hives to shock. A true peanut allergy is diagnosed with a positive skin or blood test, as well as a history of a reaction to the food that your child has experienced. An accurate diagnosis requires both.

What happens if my child normally eats peanuts, then has a positive allergy test to peanut?

First, your child cannot become allergic from the test itself. A positive allergy test could mean that your child is sensitized to peanut and may not be truly allergic to them. Or, it might indicate that your child is allergic to similar pollen from birch trees or other plants instead of peanut. A child who is eating peanuts frequently is tolerant to peanut. Before your child stops eating peanuts, consider making an appointment with a pediatric allergist.

Is there a difference between peanut and tree nut allergies?

Yes. About half of children with peanut allergies are also likely to have tree nut allergies. Peanuts grow near the ground and are considered a legume. Peas and soybeans are also legumes. Tree nuts include cashews, walnuts, macadamia nuts and pecans. If your child normally eats peanut butter or peanuts, then suddenly has an allergic reaction to mixed nuts, he or she could be allergic to tree nuts rather than peanuts.

Are all allergic reactions to peanuts severe?

No, while peanut allergies are often associated with life-threatening emergencies, statistics show something different. A study of 4,000 children, published this year in *Pediatrics*, found that serious reactions were seen in just over half of the patients with peanut allergies. While it is important if your child has a true peanut allergy to be cautious and careful about the food products your child consumes, it may be helpful to know that not all reactions result in a life-threatening emergency, based on the results of this study.

If my child has a food allergy, should I have him or her tested for other food allergies?

Not necessarily. The value of an allergy test depends on your child's history with that food. About 50 percent of the time, tests produce false positive results. You should talk to your child's doctor or a specialist. Allergy tests simply show that your child has a sensitivity to a certain food, not necessarily an allergy.

