

Tequesta Family Practice

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Is your food making you sick?

Feeling tired, bloated, achy, or run down? How about all of the above? Well, these symptoms, and many other common health complaints can often be caused by adverse reactions to foods and additives found in our diet. A growing body of medical research has proven that chronic conditions such as migraine and other headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease, fibromyalgia, joint & muscle pain, chronic fatigue, depression, sleep disorders, asthma, attention deficit disorder, autism, skin eruptions, and a whole host of other symptoms and conditions have been linked to food allergies, food sensitivities, and food intolerances. In fact, if you add up all the people with these conditions, it can be stated that adverse food reactions may be the most common health complaint of all! Food Allergies, Sensitivities, and Intolerances

Research has shown that there are different types of adverse food reactions. In some people it may be due to an overactive immune response, such as in food allergies and sensitivities. In others, they simply have a difficult time digesting their food, such as in lactose or fructose intolerance. Each of these different "pathways" is distinct from the other, and needs to be better understood and properly diagnosed in order to provide the best treatment solution. For example, someone with an anaphylactic food allergy needs to completely avoid their trigger food or they could possibly die. On the other hand, someone with lactose intolerance can safely eat dairy products that have been treated with lactase (such as Lactaid brand milk). In all cases, identifying your trigger foods is the first step towards feeling better.

Food Allergy

The least common type of reaction of the three listed above is food allergy. But it is by far the most dangerous, as previously discussed. Food allergy is typically a quick-onset reaction of the immune system to a specific food. This hyper response leads to the release of histamine and other chemicals from mast cells, resulting in a variety of different symptoms. Patients most commonly experience wheezing, constriction of the airways, hives, swelling of the lips and mouth, and nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea within 15 minutes to a couple of hours after eating. Food allergies are usually the easiest type of food reaction to diagnose. Many times the patient can figure it out for themselves, but in some cases, skin testing or a simple blood test that measures IgE (the allergy antibody), may be needed.

Food Sensitivity

People suffering chronic conditions such as IBS, GERD, Fibromyalgia, headaches, chronic fatigue, autism and ADD are often suffering the effects of food sensitivities. Food sensitivities are also an over-reaction of the immune system to foods and food additives, but are much sneakier and more difficult to figure out than food allergy. Here's why:

- Symptom onset can be delayed as much 72 hours after ingestion. Would you consider that the headache you have right now was caused by something you ate yesterday?
- Reactive foods can vary widely from patient to patient. Even people with the exact same symptoms can have completely different sets of reactive foods.
- There are often many reactive foods and additives for each patient, not just one or two like in food allergy.
- Reactions can be dosage related. A small amount of a reactive food may not produce symptoms, but a medium or large amount will.

Usually the fastest and best method of identifying sensitive foods is through blood testing. There is a couple of tests that I've found useful: The Mediator Release Test (MRT for short) and ELISA IgG. MRT is more accurate and will pickup a wider range of reactions and can also test for additives, but is more expensive than the IgG testing, which I've also had good success with. Another approach is to go on an elimination diet, where all but a few non-reactive foods are left in the diet for a couple of weeks until symptoms resolve. Afterwards, the patient undergoes a process of "challenging" one new food every 2-4 days to identify their triggers. Elimination diets can work, but they take a long time and are often viewed as impractical. Therefore they are rarely used.

Food Intolerance

Some people don't produce the enzymes necessary to digest the foods they eat. In the case of simple sugars like lactose and fructose, which are so common in the typical American diet, certain bacteria in the gut then digest the food for us. In the process of that bacterial digestion, abundant amounts of hydrogen gas get produced. In Lactose Intolerance in particular, lactic acid, a gut irritant, also gets produced. The result is diarrhea or loose stools, bloating, gas, distention, and abdominal cramping. Identifying lactose or fructose intolerance can be accomplished by an avoidance period to achieve symptom resolution, followed by a challenge period, or by simply taking a breath hydrogen test from your doctor, which is covered by most insurance.

Allergies, Sensitivities, Intolerances: So Which One Is It?

Many patients with food sensitivities and intolerances come to me after a long bout of suffering, having seen many doctors and tried every drug on the market for their condition. Many times, the doctors they'd previously seen had told them they didn't think diet had anything to do with their condition. But it turned out it was the main thing causing their suffering. Just imagine how much pain and misery they could have been spared had they taken the right approach in the beginning.

Trying to figure out on your own which foods are causing your illness can be a long difficult task - but it can be done. There are many books that describe a proper elimination diet and how one can approach it to be successful. Some other complications arise when a person has a combination of allergies, sensitivities, and intolerances. In most cases the quickest and best approach is to consult a physician who's knowledgeable in adverse food reactions.

Stay Healthy!

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