

Food Allergies in the United States

It is estimated that 33 million people have food allergies in the United States. That's a lot of hungry people that want to eat out at Virginia restaurants! There are many foods that can cause an allergic reaction in a person, but the following eight foods account for 90% of all food-related allergic reactions:

- *Fin Fish (including salmon, cod, tilapia)*
- *Crustacean Shellfish (including shrimp, crab and lobster)*
- *Milk*
- *Peanuts*
- *Soy*
- *Wheat*
- *Eggs*
- *Tree Nuts (almonds, pecans and walnuts)*

What is a food allergy?

A food allergy, much like any other allergy is caused when a person's body reacts to a substance like it is harmful. The body produces antibodies to fight against the allergen. The reaction to this process can vary based on the quantity of allergen consumed and the amount of previous exposures. An allergic reaction to a food allergen can vary from uncomfortable symptoms to a life-threatening experience. Some common [symptoms](#) include:

- *Hives (swollen, itchy skin irritation)*
- *Nausea or vomiting*
- *Stomach pain*
- *Itchy throat or mouth*
- *Swelling of lips, tongue or throat*
- *Sneeze or cough*
- *Trouble swallowing*
- *Shortness of breath*
- *Chest pain*
- *Loss of consciousness*
- *Cyanotic (bluish colored skin)*

Anaphylaxis – means a severe, life threatening reaction to an allergen that is a combination of one or more symptoms above and poses an immediate danger to the life of the person. It is often associated with a respiratory or cardiac emergency where rapid recognition and reaction is critical.

Are you allergic or intolerant?



*It is important to note that there is a distinct difference between [food allergies](#) and [food intolerances](#). Food intolerances such as lactose intolerance of dairy products can cause symptoms of gastrointestinal issues and discomfort. While it is important for people with food intolerances to avoid the consumption of such products, the likelihood of serious, life-threatening reactions is low. You should visit a medical professional if you think you are intolerant to a certain food item. Restaurant employees need to be aware of both food allergies and food intolerances to ensure a *happy, healthy* customer.*

What's the difference between a food intolerance and a food allergy?

Physical reactions to certain foods are common, but most are caused by a food intolerance rather than a food allergy. A food intolerance can cause some of the same signs and symptoms as a food allergy, so people often confuse the two.

A true food allergy affects the immune system. Even small amounts of the offending food can trigger a range of symptoms, which can be severe or life-threatening. In contrast, a food intolerance often affects only the digestive system and causes less serious symptoms.

If you have a food intolerance, you may be able to eat small amounts of the offending food without trouble. You may also be able to prevent a reaction. For example, if you have lactose intolerance, you may be able to drink lactose-free milk or take lactase enzyme pills (Lactaid) to aid digestion.

Causes of food intolerance include:

- **Absence of an enzyme needed to fully digest a food.** Lactose intolerance is a common example.
- **Irritable bowel syndrome.** This chronic condition can cause cramping, constipation and diarrhea.
- **Sensitivity to food additives.** For example, sulfites used to preserve dried fruit, canned goods and wine can trigger asthma attacks in people who are sensitive to food additives.

What about celiac disease?

This chronic digestive condition is triggered by eating gluten, a protein found in wheat and other grains. Celiac disease has some features of a true food allergy because it involves the immune system. Symptoms often include gastrointestinal issues as well as those unrelated to the digestive system, such as joint pain and headaches. However, people with celiac disease are not at risk of anaphylaxis.

If you have a reaction after eating a particular food, see your doctor to determine whether you have a food intolerance or a food allergy.

If you have a food allergy, you may be at risk of a life-threatening allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) — even if past reactions have been mild. Learn how to recognize a severe allergic reaction and know what to do if one occurs. You may need to carry an emergency epinephrine shot (Adrenaclick, Auvi-Q, EpiPen) for emergency self-treatment.

If you have a food intolerance, your doctor may recommend steps to aid digestion of certain foods or to treat the underlying condition causing your reaction.

Many Virginia food establishments are designing menus for diners with food allergies or intolerances.

Food Allergy Checklists

Dining out should be enjoyable for everyone



Having a fun meal out with family and friends is a luxury that some Virginians don't get to experience. People with food allergies are often worried about consuming food in restaurants even if their server claims it is free of the allergen. It is vital that Virginia food establishments take precautions to avoid contaminating foods served to their customers, especially those with allergens. Here are some steps for customers with allergies and for food establishment employees to use in order to help avoid accidental cross-contact of food:

Consumer Checklist:

- ✓ Visit the restaurant's website to make sure the menu has items that will suit your diet and taste buds
- ✓ Call ahead to make sure the restaurant will accommodate your needs- this is a good sign of whether a restaurant is properly trained on food allergens
- ✓ Choose a time of day that is less busy to dine at a restaurant- it is less likely for mistakes to occur
- ✓ Print out a [Food Allergy Alert Card](#) which outlines allergens you must avoid
- ✓ Make your server/ wait staff aware of your allergen and the importance
- ✓ Ask to see ingredient lists & prepackaged labels
- ✓ Avoid buffets as they are more likely to have contact with food allergens
- ✓ Carry your epinephrine and ensure someone with you knows how to use it
- ✓ Be an expert on your allergy- no one knows your body & reaction like you do!

Restaurant Employee Checklist:

- ✓ Make yourself aware of food allergens, the symptoms of a reaction and what you can do to help avoid food allergic reactions for your customers
- ✓ Have a print-out in a highly visible spot for your staff to see allergen info
- ✓ Ask your patrons if they have any of the major food allergens
- ✓ Give specific instructions to your chef/ cooks about food allergens in each party- use Food Allergen Alert Cards

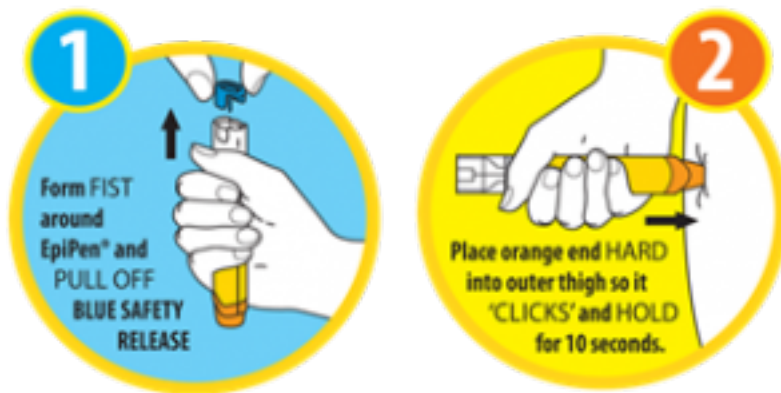
✓ *Be careful to avoid cross-contact*

- *Wash hands and use new gloves between touching ready to eat food especially after touching a food allergen.*
- *Start with a clean work space and equipment. Clean and sanitize the cooking utensils and food contact surfaces before touching non-allergen food*
- *Do not use the same grill or fryer as an allergen was prepared*
- *Clean tables and seats with single use cloth between guests*

✓ *Treat them as your guests because they are!*

How do I handle a food allergy reaction?

1. *Have the individual administer their epinephrine auto-injector (EpiPen) if available & signs of anaphylaxis are present*
2. *Call 9-1-1 for emergency assistance*
3. *Get the food item away from the individual*
4. *Make sure their breathing is controlled and airway is open*
5. *Continue to keep breathing under control and minimize panic*
6. *Get them to medical care immediately*



Sources of Cross-Contact

Cross-contact occurs when an allergen is unintentionally transferred from one food to another. Even a tiny amount of an allergen can cause a severe and potentially life-threatening reaction.

Source of Cross-Contact	Example:
Hands	- Handling shrimp and then preparing a salad - Touching almonds and then making pasta
Utensils, cutting boards, baking sheets, pots & pans	- Using the same spatula to flip a hamburger after a cheeseburger - Slicing cheese and then vegetables on the same cutting board
Preparation and cooking surfaces	- Preparing different kinds of sandwiches on the same countertop - Cooking fish and chicken on the same flat top grill
Steam, splatter, flour dust and crumbs	- Steam from cooking fish or shellfish touches nearby foods - Baking flour from pancake mix splatters onto bacon
Refrigerators, freezers and storage areas	- Ranch dressing drips onto a vinaigrette stored on a lower shelf - Milk leaks onto margarine stored on the same shelf
Deep fryers and cooking oils	- Making french fries in a deep fryer after chicken tenders - Reusing cooking oil to sauté green beans after sautéing fish
Condiments, nut butters and jelly/jams	- Dipping a knife used to spread peanut butter into a jelly jar - Touching the tip of a squeeze ketchup bottle to a breaded chicken breast
Shortcuts	- Picking croutons off a salad - Scraping eggs off a plate

Proper Cleaning to Remove Allergens



Wash with warm, soapy water



Rinse with clean water



Air dry

For each new item, use clean:

Hands
Latex-free Gloves

Utensils
Surfaces

Oil and Water
Pots/Pans/Baking Sheets



MILK



WHEAT



EGGS



SOY



SHELLFISH



PEANUTS



TREE NUTS



FISH



SESAME

Top 9 Allergens

But over 170 foods have caused food allergy reactions

Prevent Cross-Contact

Keep diners with food allergies safe. Even a tiny amount of an allergen can cause a severe and potentially life-threatening allergic reaction.

Cross-Contact	Cross-Contamination
Occurs when an allergen is unintentionally transferred from one food to another	Occurs when microorganisms like bacteria contaminate food
Can cause food allergy reactions	Can cause foodborne illnesses
Proper cooking does NOT reduce or eliminate the chances of a food allergy reaction	Proper cooking may reduce or eliminate the chances of foodborne illness



Always wash hands and change gloves between preparing different menu items



Clean and sanitize surfaces between every menu item: countertops, cutting boards, flat-top grills, etc.



Always use clean kitchen tools for food preparation: pots, baking sheets, utensils, cutting boards, etc.



Prepare meals on top of barriers like cutting boards, foil, deli paper, etc.



Remember: If a mistake is made, you must start over and remake the allergy-friendly meal

Proper Cleaning to Remove Allergens



Wash with warm, soapy water



Rinse with clean water



Air dry



MILK



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