

# TREE NUT ALLERGY

Tree nut allergy is one of the most common food allergies in children and adults, and can cause a severe, potentially fatal allergic reaction (anaphylaxis). Tree nuts include, but are not limited to: almond, Brazil nut, cashew, hazelnut, macadamia, pecan, pine nut, pistachio and walnut. These are not to be confused or grouped together with peanut, which is a legume, or seeds, such as sunflower or sesame.



## What is a food allergy?

Food allergy is a serious medical condition affecting up to 32 million people in the United States, including 1 in 13 children. Food allergy happens when your body's immune defenses that normally fight disease attack a food protein instead. The food protein is called an allergen, and your body's response is called an allergic reaction.

## How common are nut allergies?

Nine foods account for a majority of reactions: milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, sesame and shellfish. Even trace amounts of a food allergen can cause a reaction. Peanut and tree nut allergies, which tend to develop in childhood, are usually lifelong. In the U.S., approximately three million people report allergies to peanuts and tree nuts.

## How are tree nut allergies diagnosed?

Suspected food allergies should always be evaluated, diagnosed, and treated by a qualified medical professional, such as a board-certified allergist. Your primary care provider may refer you to an allergist.

First, an allergist will do a thorough medical history. This will include questions to determine if food allergy may be causing your symptoms and to identify the culprit food(s).

Next, the allergist will perform a medical exam and may conduct tests to help identify a food allergy. While these tests alone do not always provide clear-cut answers, the allergist will combine your

test results with the information given in your medical history for a diagnosis. These tests may include:

- Skin prick test
- Blood test
- Oral food challenge
- Trial elimination diet

Oral food challenges are considered the gold standard for definitive diagnosis.

Depending on your medical history and initial test results, you may need to take more than one test before receiving your diagnosis.

## Signs and symptoms of an allergic reaction to any food

An allergic reaction to food can affect the skin, the gastrointestinal tract, the respiratory tract, and, in the most serious cases, the cardiovascular system. Reactions can range from mild to severe, including the potentially life-threatening condition known as anaphylaxis.

### Mild Symptoms

-  **NOSE:** Itchy or runny nose, sneezing
-  **MOUTH:** Itchy mouth
-  **SKIN:** A few hives, mild itch
-  **GUT:** Mild nausea or discomfort

Mild symptoms in more than one body area may be a sign of anaphylaxis and requires immediate treatment.

## Severe Symptoms or Anaphylaxis

-  **LUNG:** Shortness of breath, wheezing, repetitive cough
-  **HEART:** Pale or bluish skin, faintness, weak pulse, dizziness
-  **THROAT:** Tight or hoarse throat, trouble breathing or swallowing
-  **MOUTH:** Significant swelling of the tongue or lips
-  **SKIN:** Many hives over body, widespread redness
-  **GUT:** Repetitive vomiting or severe diarrhea
-  **OTHER:** Feeling something bad will happen, anxiety, confusion

Severe symptoms, alone or in combination with other symptoms, may be signs of anaphylaxis and require immediate treatment.

## What is the best treatment for tree nut allergy?

There is no cure for tree nut allergy. Patients who experience a single mild symptom (e.g., itching, sneezing, hives and rashes) are often treated with antihistamines and oral or topical steroids.

For severe food allergic reactions, epinephrine is the only medication that can reverse the symptoms. Medical experts advise that people with tree nut allergies always carry two epinephrine auto-injectors with them at all times.

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If prescribed, use epinephrine immediately at the first sign of a severe reaction and then call 911. Request an ambulance and tell the dispatchers you are experiencing a suspected food allergy or anaphylactic reaction and may need additional epinephrine. Patients should always go to the emergency room for further evaluation, even if symptoms appear to resolve after epinephrine is administered.

## How do I know if a product contains tree nuts?

The federal Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) requires that all packaged food sold in the U.S. disclose when tree nuts are an ingredient. This means the package label must list the specific tree nut used in the food.

Read all product labels carefully before purchasing and consuming any item. Ingredients may change without warning, so check ingredient statements carefully every time you shop. If you have questions, call the manufacturer.

Additionally, the use of advisory labeling (e.g., precautionary statements such as “may contain,” “processed in a facility that also processes,” or “made on equipment with”) is optional for manufacturers. Because these statements aren’t required or regulated, their presence or absence may or may not indicate if a product actually contains a specific allergen. According to the Food and Drug Administration’s guidance to the food industry on this issue, advisory labels “should not be used as a substitute for adhering to current good manufacturing practices and must be truthful and not misleading.”

## Avoiding Tree Nuts

To prevent an allergic reaction, strict avoidance of tree nuts and tree nut

## For a Tree-Nut-Free Diet

### Avoid foods that contain nuts or any of these ingredients:

Almond	Litchi/lychee/lychee nut	Nut pieces
Artificial nuts	Macadamia nut	Pecan
Brazil nut	Marzipan/almond paste	Pesto
Beechnut	Nangai nut	Pili nut
Butternut	Natural nut extract (e.g., almond, walnut)	Pine nut (also referred to as Indian, pignoli, pignolia, pignon, piñon, and pinyon nut)
Cashew	Nut butters (e.g., cashew butter)	Pistachio
Chestnut	Nut meal	Praline
Chinquapin nut	Nut meat	Shea nut
Filbert/hazelnut	Nut milk (e.g., almond milk, cashew milk)	Walnut
Gianduja (a chocolate-nut mixture)	Nut paste (e.g., almond paste)	
Ginkgo nut		
Hickory nut		

### Tree nuts are sometimes found in the following:

Black walnut hull extract (flavoring)	Nut distillates/alcoholic extracts	Walnut hull extract (flavoring)
Natural nut extract	Nut oils (e.g., walnut oil, almond oil)	

### Keep the following in mind:

- Mortadella may contain pistachios.
- There is no evidence that coconut oil and shea nut oil/butter are allergenic.
- Many experts advise patients allergic to tree nuts to avoid peanuts as well.
- Talk to your doctor if you find other nuts not listed here.
- Coconut, the seed of a drupaceous fruit, has typically not been restricted in the diets of people with tree nut allergy. However, in October of 2006, the FDA began identifying coconut as a tree nut. Medical literature documents a small number of allergic reactions to coconut; most occurred in people who were not allergic to other tree nuts. Ask your doctor if you need to avoid coconut.

products is essential. Always read ingredient labels to identify tree nut ingredients.

A person with an allergy to one type of tree nut has a higher chance of being allergic to other types. Therefore, many experts advise patients with any nut allergy to avoid all tree nuts. Patients may also be advised to avoid peanuts because peanuts have a high likelihood of cross-contact with tree nuts during manufacturing and processing.

## Additional Resources

**Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Emergency Care Plan** - This valuable tool outlines recommended treatment in case of an allergic reaction, is signed by a physician

and includes emergency contact information. [foodallergy.org/ecp](http://foodallergy.org/ecp)

**Food Allergy Field Guide** - This online destination brings together resources from FARE (Food Allergy Research and Education) to help newly-diagnosed patients and families navigate their food allergies. It provides you with information you need to avoid reactions, shop smartly and live well with food allergies. [foodallergy.org/newtofoodallergy](http://foodallergy.org/newtofoodallergy)

**How to Read a Food Label** - Prevent a food allergy reaction by learning how to read a food label for your allergen. [foodallergy.org/foodlabels](http://foodallergy.org/foodlabels)

