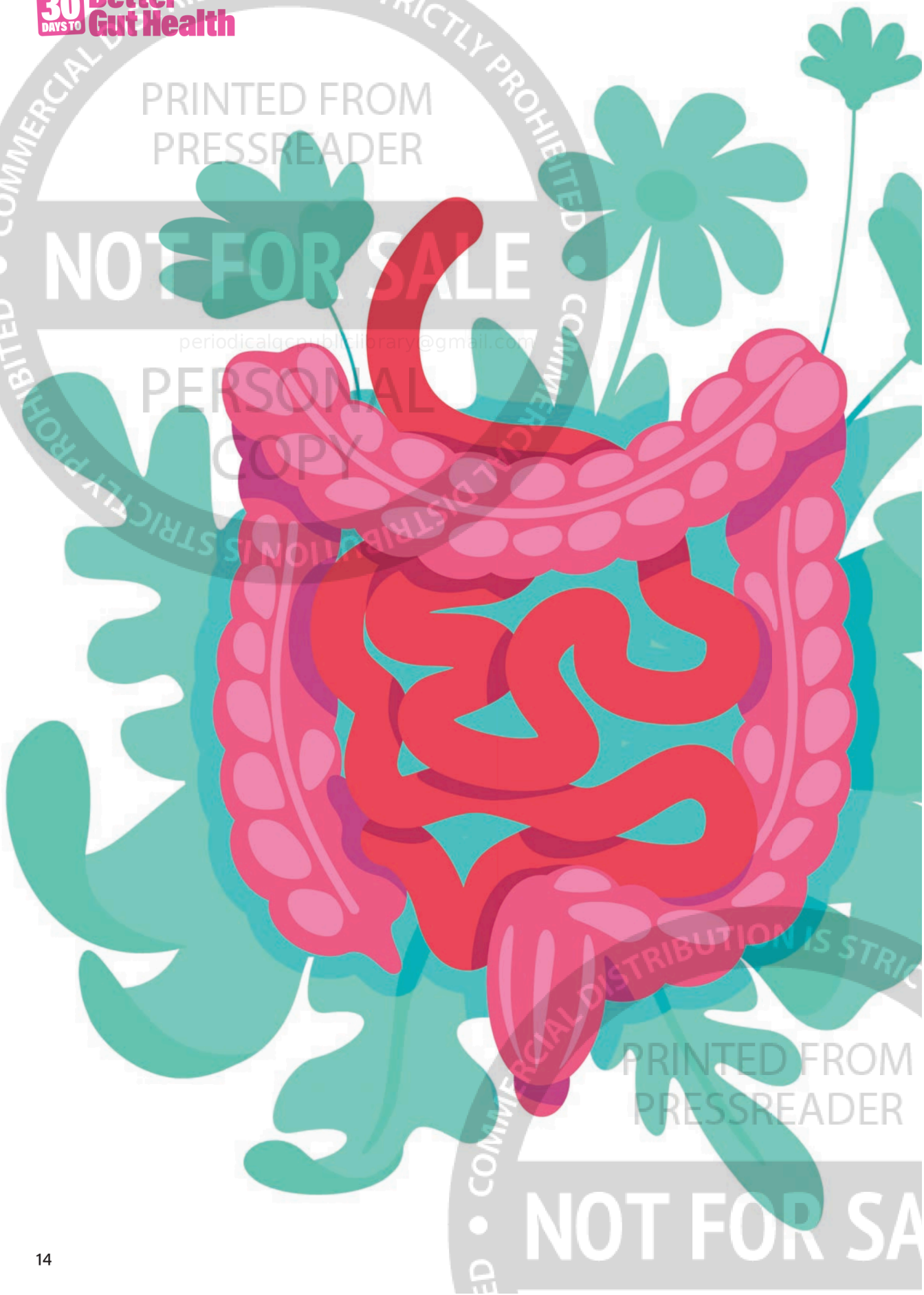
- Allergy / Food sensitivity



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Allergy or Intolerance?

Words: Dr Nita Maha

Do you suffer from gut symptoms after eating? You might think you have an allergy or an intolerance to a certain food – but how do you find out, and how do you tell the difference?

An allergy is where the body's immune system reacts to something that isn't necessarily harmful (an allergen), but the body perceives it as a threat. The body activates all its fighter cells to help combat the perceived threat, and this can cause symptoms which can leave you feeling unwell.

Imagine that you hear a noise in your house unexpectedly and think it's a burglar. You raise the alarm and create a lot of commotion, but actually it was just a neighbour popping in to say hello. The perceived threat was a false alarm, but it still created a lot of drama. Allergies are similar; the body can go into overdrive, giving you a lot of symptoms for something which isn't usually a problem. Sometimes this is mild overdrive, but in more serious cases it can make you very unwell.

What is food intolerance?

Food intolerance or sensitivity is different to an allergy. Here you don't get the body's immune system reacting. The body can have trouble digesting the food, sometimes due to lack of enzymes – proteins that help breakdown food. You may be able to eat small amounts of food without any problems.

How common are allergies and intolerances?

Allergies are on the rise, but true numbers can be difficult to know. According to Allergy UK, over 40% of adults now suffer with at least one allergy. It's likely when you go out for dinner that at least one member of your party will have an allergy. It is estimated that 1-10% of adults and children have a food sensitivity.

The rising number of allergies has been particularly noticeable in the developing world. There are many theories for this and research is still going on, but some people believe that pollution, dietary changes, and less exposure to certain microbes could be contributing.

The science behind allergies

The immune system (or defence system) is complex. Proteins called immunoglobulins are made by the immune system to fight off infections. Antibodies are a type of immunoglobulin. Immunoglobulin E (IgE) can be activated in an allergy and it releases several chemicals including histamine, cytokines and leukotrienes, which cause many allergy-type symptoms over the entire body. Symptoms of an IgE mediated response occur very quicky after eating, usually within seconds or minutes.

There are other types of allergic reactions which are not led by IgE, and these tend to be more delayed and less severe. Some people may get a combination of IgE mediated and non IgE mediated reactions which can cause immediate reactions such as skin rashes and swelling, but also more delayed issues such as gut disturbance.

The gut microbiome

This is a collection of organisms that live in your gut. It plays a key role in keeping our gut happy and healthy. New research has shown that children with a higher level of allergy-based symptoms have reduced levels of healthy species of bacteria in the gut. Some studies have shown that using probiotics in early childhood can help prevent allergies.

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30 DAYS TO Better Gut Health

How can you tell... AN ALLERGY FROM AN INTOLERANCE?

The reality is that it can be hard to tell the difference, but try asking yourself the following questions as there are some key differences

What can cause an allergy?

Most allergies are caused by the following items:

- Tree and grass pollens
- House dust mites
- Animals such as dogs and cat
- Foods such as nuts and eggs
- Chemicals such as latex
- Soy



What are common symptoms?

- Gut: Nausea, diarrhoea, abdominal pain
- Nasal: Sneezing, runny or blocked nose
- Eyes: Itchy, red or watering eyes
- Skin: rashes, typically raised areas called hives
- Swelling of tissues: this is called angioedema and can be life threatening
- Problems breathing: feeling out of breath or wheezy
- More serious life-threatening symptoms (anaphylaxis) are rare. Anaphylaxis can cause several severe symptoms including wheezing, swelling, a drop in blood pressure, loss of consciousness and may require hospitalisation

How soon do symptoms occur?

Allergic responses usually happen quite quickly.

How much food can cause a reaction?

An allergy can be caused by a tiny amount of food. If someone has a severe nut allergy it can cause anaphylaxis.

What can cause a gut intolerance?

Food intolerances can cover a broader range of foods including food additives, dairy products, gluten, caffeine and alcohol.

What are common symptoms?

This is where it can become tricky to navigate the difference as many of the symptoms are the same as for allergies:

- Gut: diarrhoea, bloating and cramps.
- Skin rashes and itching
- Feeling tired
- Headaches

There can be an overlap with other conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) which can make it even harder to know the difference.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Food intolerances usually occur a few hours after eating a food – while an allergic reaction tends to happen more quickly.

How much food can cause a reaction?

With an intolerance, generally speaking, you need a lot more of the food in question to cause symptoms and they are not life threatening.







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How to get diagnosed

Putting up with gut symptoms can be very limiting. Maybe you don't eat out anymore because you can't face the repercussions. So how can you reach a diagnosis?

Food diary

Keeping a food diary can help identify if there is a pattern between what you eat and your symptoms. Write down everything you eat and record any symptoms that you have. It won't formally diagnose you, but can help identify an issue.

Blood tests

This can identify if you have specific IgE antibodies. For example, if you have an allergy to dust, you may have higher IgE antibodies to dust. These tests can be expensive and only certain items can be tested. The tests can show you are sensitised to a certain thing, but you may not be allergic to it. The test is called a Radioallergosorbent (RAST) test.

Elimination and challenge

If you have an idea about what could be causing your symptoms, try eliminating it from your diet for a certain length of time, such as two weeks, then try introducing it again. Hopefully this will eliminate any symptoms such as nausea, bloating or other gut symptoms.

Skin prick testing

This is arranged by an allergy specialist. There is a small scratch to the skin and a little bit of allergen is placed on the skin. If a red mark appears, or if there is a bit of swelling to the skin, it is measured and can indicate an allergy to that substance. It can be used to test for different substances including food, pollen, mould and pet fur. These tests can be read in about an hour.

Treatments for allergies

There are numerous treatments for allergies that can be tried.

Avoidance

Sometimes the easiest option is to avoid the likely trigger. This can mean checking with restaurants about what ingredients certain foods contain and looking at food lists.

Antihistamines

These are commonly used drugs that you can buy over the counter. They stop the production of histamine, the chemical responsible for causing immune reactions. If you are pregnant, remember that some of these drug effects are still untested, so you need to check with your medical professional before taking any.

Epipen

This is an injection for serious allergies which can cause anaphylaxis. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include throat swelling, wheezing, tightness in throat and loss of consciousness. This may require hospitalisation.

Immunotherapy

This is a specialist allergy treatment which involves exposing your body to certain allergies over time so it becomes used to it.

Common food intolerances

Food intolerances are on the increase and can present themselves through a diverse range of produce.

Lactose intolerance

This is the most common type of food intolerance. Symptoms such as bloating, excess wind, diarrhoea, nausea and vomiting can start a few minutes or hours after drinking milk. The body lacks the ability to digest lactose, a sugar found in many dairy products and milk. It can often be genetic and is predisposed to people of Asian, Hispanic and Afro-Caribbean descent.

You can be intolerant to any type of food

Common causes include gluten, alcohol, caffeine, monosodium glutamate (found in ripened fruits, cured meats and savoury foods), and salicylates found in some fruit, vegetables, herbs and spices.

It is important to remember that other factors, such as stress and portion size, can play a part in how you react to certain foods.

