

# Allergy to – Wheat

## What is wheat allergy?

Allergy occurs when the body's immune system reacts to something that is usually harmless because it mistakenly registers that substance as a threat. In wheat-allergic people, the immune system treats one or more of the proteins in wheat as a danger to the body and starts an allergic reaction when wheat is eaten, touched or inhaled.

The vast majority of people who experience adverse reactions to wheat are not wheat-allergic – they are either wheat intolerant or have coeliac disease. Wheat intolerance is not triggered by the immune system and cannot be diagnosed with the use of standard allergy tests (such as blood or skin tests). It affects the digestion; common symptoms include digestive discomfort, diarrhoea and bloating, and it is more common than wheat allergy.



Coeliac disease is a response by the immune system but is not an allergic response; it is a condition where some glutens (proteins found in wheat and some other cereals) damage the small bowel lining and the gut.

This document is confined to wheat allergy.

## Diagnosis of wheat allergy

See your GP and ask to be referred to an NHS allergy clinic. Diagnosis will involve questions about your medical, family and food history, and you may be given a skin-prick test and/or blood test. These tests are not perfect. Many people with allergy to grass pollen have a positive skin-prick test to wheat, due to common allergenic properties in wheat and grass pollen. This might suggest they are allergic to wheat, but they do not actually react to it. The skin test is very helpful if interpreted correctly, taking into account the clinical story of reactions. Positive blood tests alone, without this information, can be very misleading.

The most reliable test will be a food challenge. This involves being given tiny amounts of the allergen in a hospital setting to see if a reaction takes place. If you do not react to the first dose of wheat, another, slightly larger dose will be given and this will continue either until a reaction takes place or the highest dose has been reached. Medical staff will be on hand to treat you at the first sign of a reaction. The challenge may be open (in other words you will know that wheat is being administered) or double-blind (when the foods will be concealed and interspersed with dummy or placebo challenges).

## How common is wheat allergy?

There are no accurate figures; clinical experience suggests it is very uncommon – far less common, say, than peanut, egg or milk allergy.

Wheat allergy occurs in children as well as adults, but is usually outgrown in early infancy.

Certain people are more prone to wheat allergy than others – such as bakers, who come into prolonged contact with wheat every day; this is a condition known as baker's asthma.

## Symptoms of wheat allergy

Allergic reactions to wheat usually begin within minutes after eating or inhaling wheat, but can occur after a few hours. Symptoms vary from person to person and from one occasion to another. You may experience symptoms affecting one or more of the following:

- The skin (urticaria, atopic eczema, facial swelling);
- The gastrointestinal tract (oral allergy syndrome, abdominal cramps, nausea and vomiting);
- The respiratory tract (asthma, throat closure or allergic rhinitis);
- Rarely, anaphylactic shock.

The risk of a severe reaction is low for the vast majority of wheat-allergic people. Sometimes the food, when eaten in conjunction with exercise, may trigger a reaction that may be severe.

## What to avoid

Avoidance of wheat and wheat-containing foods is the first step in the management of wheat allergy. Always check ingredients' lists, even when you have safely eaten something before. The alternatives to wheat suggested in this information sheet are a handy guide, but checking is still important.

## Pre-packaged foods

All pre-packaged food sold within the EU must declare major allergens, including the presence of wheat, even if they appear in minute quantities.

## Ingredients to avoid include:

**Bread** – a major problem food. You may find wheat-free bread in specialist shops. Check that it is labelled wheat free and not just 'gluten free'. Rice crackers can also be used as a bread substitute.

Products labelled 'gluten-free' are likely to prove tempting – but some may not be suitable. The description 'gluten-free' is based on the principle that this level will be safe for people with coeliac disease. There is a difference between coeliac disease and acute allergy – the latter being triggered by much smaller amounts. Gluten present at tiny levels may be a problem for someone with wheat



allergy if a reasonable portion is eaten. People with severe wheat allergy should be cautious and ask the manufacturer whether tiny amounts of gluten might be present, through cross-contamination, for example.

**Breadcrumbs** – these are often used in processed foods such as fish fingers. Breaded meats or burgers must be avoided.

**Cereals** – wheat-based cereals must be avoided, as must those with wheat products added. Terms to look for and avoid include bran, bulgar wheat, couscous, rusk, semolina, wheat (including varieties such as kamut, spelt and triticale) and wheatgerm.

**Desserts and sweet things** – anything containing wheat or wheat flour is a problem food including cakes, pastries, ice cream wafers and cones, biscuits and doughnuts.

**Pasta** – avoid any pasta made with wheat or semolina. Remember that pasta is found in some soups such as minestrone. There are now pastas on the market made from corn, rice and buckwheat.

**Wheat flour – or whole wheat flour** As well as being present in bread and pastry, wheat flour can be present in gravy, salad dressings, sauces, soups and other processed foods. Read labels carefully.

**Hydrolysed vegetable protein (HVP)** can be derived from wheat and is used to give a savoury flavour to products such as sauces, soups and gravies.

**Modified starch** – avoid modified wheat starch.

**Soy sauce – or soya sauce** is widely used in Far Eastern dishes and in soups, gravies, stews and sauces. A small amount of wheat is usually used to produce this sauce so it should be avoided unless it is clearly marked Wheat Free.

The content of this Fact Sheet has been **Peer Reviewed by Dr Pamela Ewan, Consultant Allergist, Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge.**

**Disclaimer** – The information provided in this leaflet is given in good faith. Every effort has been taken to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

**About The Anaphylaxis Campaign – *"helping people with severe allergies live their lives"***

The Anaphylaxis Campaign is the only UK charity to exclusively meet the needs of the growing numbers of people at risk from severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) by providing information and support relating to foods and other triggers such as latex, drugs and insect stings. Our focus is on medical facts, food labelling, risk reduction and allergen management. The Campaign offers tailored services for individual, clinical professional and corporate members.

Visit our website [www.anaphylaxis.org.uk](http://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk).