

Allergy Alert! don't be so sensitive

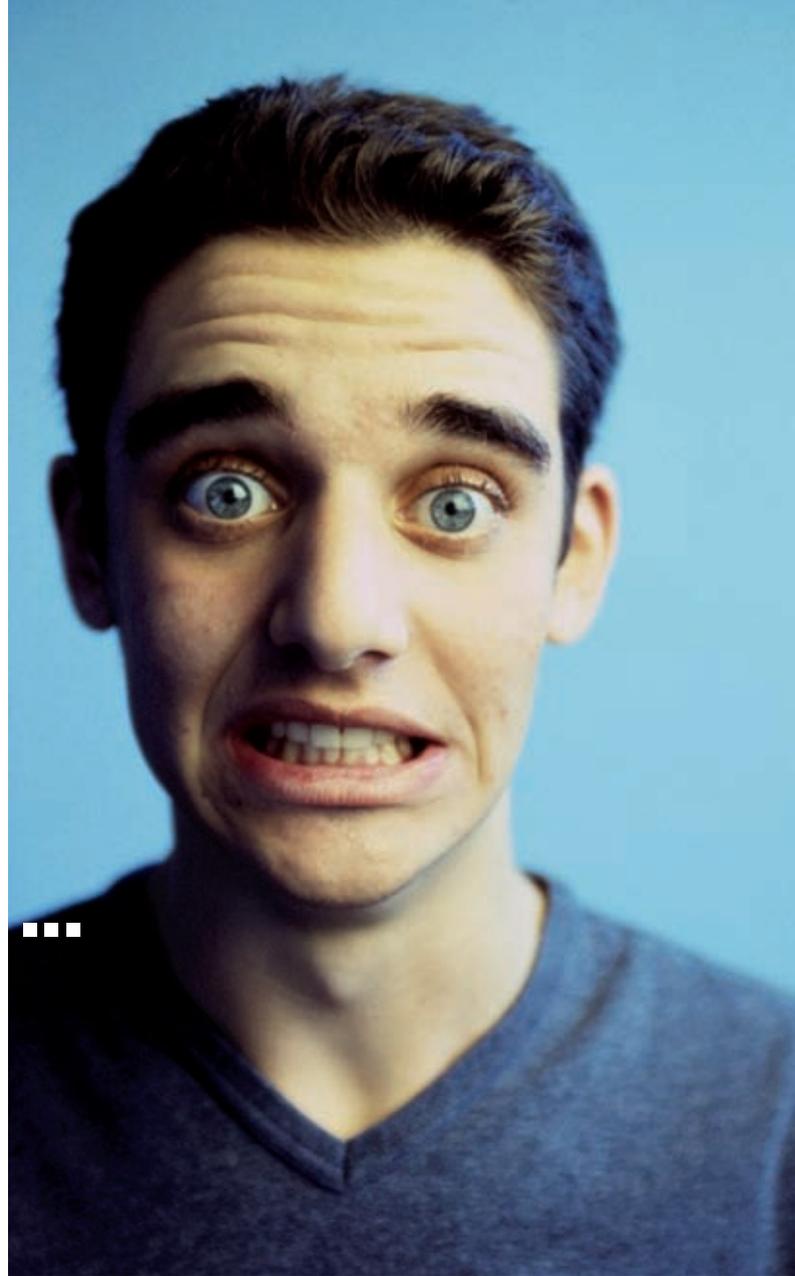
by Leisa Harford BHSc, Adv Dip Herb Med

Remember the 'old' days? Gender roles were clearly defined; women kept the kitchen and kids in line, while the men brought home the figurative bacon ... A Sunday roast was the mainstay of most families, with everyone routinely eating what they were served with no complaints or fuss ...

However, these days we are bombarded with the complexities of one or more 'fussy' eating stipulations from one or more of the family or guests at our dinner table. Sensitivities, intolerances (we are not talking about personality differences here) and allergies, commonly dictate the menus at many a dinner party, cafe, restaurant or day care centre, with an estimated one in five New Zealanders being affected to some degree. While for many people this causes mild to moderate discomfort from symptoms, for some people the effects are potentially life-threatening.

Although research is ongoing, there is widespread recognition that many aspects of our modern lifestyles play a major role. This includes spending time in air-conditioned environments, increased hygiene standards resulting in underdeveloped immune systems, processed foods and artificial additives, genetic engineering, earlier weaning and subsequent introduction of solid foods for babies, immunisations, no seasonal variations in fruit and vegetable consumption and the overuse of specific foods such as wheat and soy. We also know that to some degree, allergies and sensitivities have a genetic component (it's always handy to blame your parents) – children with one allergic parent have a 30pc chance of developing an allergy, and this figure doubles if both parents are allergic.

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When we consider these factors, a picture starts to emerge of a society that is pushing the human body beyond its comfort zone, and confusing the natural state of equilibrium. Despite the phenomenal advances that have been made in the fields of medicine and science, amongst other things, our overall health and wellbeing seem to be deteriorating. Are we unwittingly contributing to our own demise via the development and demand for the highly processed, easily accessible, more financially viable, better tasting (read high fat and sugar content), and more user-friendly foodstuffs we are increasingly becoming dependant on? Why do allergies and intolerances seem so pervasive, or do we just know more now than we did several decades ago?

what are food allergies and intolerances really?

Firstly, there are real live allergic reactions that typically occur within a few hours of ingestion due to an inappropriate response of our immune system to normally harmless substances. The body actually forms immune cells (IgE-immune cells) that recognise the offending food and cause the symptoms each time it is eaten. Some allergic reactions can be serious (usually caused by peanuts or shellfish), and people tend to know they are at risk and take precautions. ➤

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Secondly, there are food hypersensitivities or intolerances which are adverse reactions to foods, but do not involve the immune system. These can be instant, or delayed for up to 20 hours after ingestion. Because of this, the symptoms seem more insidious and are often difficult to pinpoint. Bloating, wind, diarrhoea, constipation, nausea, indigestion, mood swings, foggy thinking, eczema and asthma can occur seemingly randomly.

A fascinating aspect of this allergy/hypersensitivity issue is the link they have with addictions, and the phenomenon of hidden or masked allergies. The innate intelligence of the human body is truly mind-boggling when we postulate that allergies are nature's way of reminding us to take care of ourselves and to not ignore what we expose ourselves to in our environment, or what we put in, and on, our bodies. Our senses are finely tuned to alert us when we come in contact with a substance which is not good for us. This may be a barely discernible cringe of the nostrils, to an unpleasant odour, tingling or goose bumps on the skin, a slight increase in heart rate, or a blatant vomit reflex or bowel evacuation. Think about how often you push through unpleasant sensations in order to carry out your mind's will – the post Christmas dinner guts-ache that sends you to the couch with your belt loosened, or knocking back a second tequila shot. This ties-in with the theory that allergies are closely linked in with addictions.

We crave what we are allergic to, and when we consume the desired substance, we are temporarily gratified, yet within a few hours or less, we are suffering the ill-effects of what we have ingested. This is commonly seen with 'sugar' highs, then the resulting crash, and the craving cycle beginning again. These addictive food allergies, much like alcohol and drug addictions, can lead many people into a destructive cycle of compulsive eating behaviours which lead to mood instability, feelings of low self-esteem and the inability to cope with the abnormal chemical reactions taking place in their bodies. There are both physical and mental ramifications. It is not until these problem foods are unmasked that overall health can improve and conscious eating can begin. This 'unmasking' may, in part, be responsible for why it seems as though more and more people are sensitive to certain foods.

unmasking allergies and elimination diets

Elimination diets are used by health practitioners to isolate problem foods. This involves removing the likely offenders for up to four weeks, and reintroducing them one at a time into the diet and monitoring any reactions. During the period of abstinence the body is enabled to go through a cleansing process, often assisted by a healthy diet high in fresh fruit and veges, and also specific herbs and supplements, so it is really sensitised to the reintroduction of any problem substance. This is great for isolating the cause of a person's symptoms, but where there are several problem foods, it can seem as

though the person is in a more sensitive state than before the process began.

Suddenly all is very clear, as the body is renewed and refreshed and on high alert – in a better state to pinpoint the problems and react efficiently. Again that wisdom alerting us as to what we really do and don't need!

A body that is weakened and constantly bombarded by food and substances it is intolerant of, just exists and tries to cope in a general state of sluggishness and compromise (sound familiar?) that can eventually lead to chronic and serious health problems such as chronic fatigue, inflammatory bowel, immune problems, depression and more.

going with the grain – what's up with wheat?

A common problem food is wheat, or gluten. Although bread has been a staple in the human diet for many thousands of years, the type(s) of wheat used have changed dramatically, with hybridisation occurring, both intentionally and, as a natural result of farming through the ages. Historically, bread was a heavy consistency, using grains that were readily available and cheap, but still nutritious with high levels of protein, fat, vitamins and minerals. However, heavy breads became synonymous with poorer communities, while processed and whitened breads were indicators of wealth and privilege. Over time, mass production, variations in climate and soil conditions, and consumer demand have led to farming, milling and marketing practices that have little to do with nutrition and sustainability, and more to do with output and profit. These changes, along with the prevalent use of wheat flours as agents to flavour, stabilise or thicken many different foodstuffs, may offer some explanation as to the ever-increasing incidence of wheat and gluten intolerances today. Coeliac's disease is an autoimmune condition where a person cannot tolerate any gluten whatsoever. People can be born with a genetic pre-disposition and are usually alerted to the condition by ongoing digestive disturbances.

a word of hope

If you suspect you are labouring under a food allergy or sensitivity, then do visit a naturopath, nutritionist or other health professional to guide you towards a better quality of life. There are a variety of specific tests to ascertain what your problems are, and the best approach for resolving them. The world of food allergies can seem daunting, frustrating and confusing (even to us naturopaths). However, an individualised and methodical approach can expose even the most veiled sensitivities and open up a world of balanced and nutritious (yet by no means dull) culinary options, improved energy levels, clear thinking and regular bowel motions. And once allergies and sensitivities are under control, it really often is just a matter of everything in moderation – now that's got to be good for you!

case study*

Karen is a 27-year-old bank officer who has had ongoing problems with digestion. She suffers from the following symptoms: bloating, constipation with hard, dry stools – pebble-like (it can be three days between bowel motions). She feels tired and run down and doesn't feel like exercising. All these symptoms are worse before her periods – which are heavy. She has had digestive problems as long as she can remember. She has also experienced problems with excess weight gain in the past. She suffers from hay fever in spring, exercise-induced asthma and a sore lower back. She sleeps quite well, but is still tired in the mornings. She always has borderline low iron levels.

I recommended that she have a hair analysis test to see if there were any underlying food intolerances, particularly as she has always had digestive issues. I also recommended that she have a Coeliac screen (due to signs of low iron, fatigue, digestive issues) and blood tests for iron, vitamin B12. I prepared a herbal tonic to suit her specific situation. I also recommended Spirulina (Fe, vitamin B12, folate, omegas etc.), lemon juice in the mornings to aid digestion and chamomile tea before bed to aid sleep and reduce gut cramps as well as being anti-allergic.

I saw her again after two weeks – in this time she had been taking the tonic and following the above recommendations, and was feeling better; she was having daily bowel motions (this took a few days to kick in), decreased bloating, sleeping better and had comments from people that her colour was better. At the second consultation, the results of her hair test for masked food intolerance showed that she was reacting to dairy (lactose), wheat, oats, barley, rye and gluten, MSG (621), sodium nitrite (250) and sodium nitrate (251). I recommended she should avoid these foods and chemicals to clear the reaction.

We continued with treatment, changing her tonic at one point to focus more on hormonal imbalances, as she noticed problems with PMS and sugar cravings. She noticed that the bloating and constipation settled down quite quickly, and her energy levels picked up nicely too. Over time her periods

became lighter and more manageable. She was still having up and down days, and had been reintroducing reactive foods (after around three to four months); she noticed that she felt really heavy, sluggish and constipated after eating out a bit more often (this often happens as reactions can be more immediate and more noticeable after the masking of food intolerance clears). Normally it means that it is best to avoid the foods completely until the body settles.

It is very important to reintroduce foods slowly (one day in four), so that if a reaction occurs, it is noticeable straight away (if this happens the food needs to be avoided for longer). It is usually possible to reintroduce foods on a one-day a week basis, although some people find that they can do this fairly quickly, others need to avoid foods for a longer period – up to one year.

Karen found that her digestion and energy improved noticeably, but she had to keep an eye on her diet, if she started slipping up and eating too many of the reactive foods her digestion would play up again. She now monitors her own diet. ✍

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