

Help! I can't breathe! I may be having a food allergy



When you have a food allergy, there are some common-sense measures to try and prevent the spread of germs to co-workers. You expect them to be courteous — covering their mouths when they cough and using a tissue when they sneeze. But, frankly, it's harder to manage a food allergy in the workplace. Here are some reasons why:

- A lot of people simply don't understand food allergies and how serious they can be.
- You may be casual about your food allergy because you haven't had a severe reaction . . . yet.
- Co-workers can't "see" that you have a food allergy until after the reaction hits you; if it's a severe reaction, it may already be a healthy crisis.
- Even if people you know have an allergy, they may not be aware that a cake they made or a meal they're sharing has an ingredient that can send you to the hospital.

A food allergy reaction, a serious and potentially life-threatening medical condition, sends someone to the emergency room ever three minutes in the United States.¹ The job of our body's immune system is to identify and destroy germs (such as bacteria or viruses) that make us sick. A food allergy happens when our immune system overreacts to harmless food protein—an allergen.

There can be regional differences in food allergies. According to research, anaphylaxis varies across the geographic areas of the world:²

- In the Middle East, sesame is a common food allergy.
- Common triggers in Asia are milk, rice, and chickpeas.
- In Western countries, common food allergies include peanuts, wheat, nuts, shellfish, milk, and eggs.

In some cases, you may be suffering from a food intolerance rather than an allergic reaction. When you suffer from food intolerance, your body has trouble digesting or processing a particular food. For example, if you're lactose intolerant, you might experience abdominal pain or bloating when you drink milk. Your body might have problems with chemical compounds that are added to foods to enhance flavors or act as a preservative. For example, some people get headaches from monosodium glutamate (MSG). But these are not allergic reactions.

Food allergies are a basic health and safety issue. You need to communicate openly about your food allergies to your co-workers. You also need to encourage your co-workers to tell you if they have food allergies. Courtesy and consideration can save a life.

Tell your co-workers what specific food allergy you have. You can be humorous or educational. Just be clear that food allergies are extremely important. They are much more serious than just an irritation.

¹Food Allergy Research & Education, "Food Allergy Facts & Statistics for the U.S.," April 2020

²American College of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology, "Anaphylaxis." January 28, 2018, accessed at <https://acaai.org/allergies/anaphylaxis>, November 2020

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