**Food allergy basics**

An allergy is an immune system reaction that happens shortly after eating a particular food. The body mistakenly interprets that food as harmful and releases something in the bloodstream to fight that culprit. Even a very small amount of that food can trigger a reaction, and sometimes those reactions are serious.

Milk, eggs, peanuts, tree nuts, soy, wheat, fish, shellfish -- these are the most common food allergens affecting Americans. Today nearly 7 percent of young children and 4 percent of older children and adults have such allergies.

Common allergic reactions include tingling or itchy mouth, hives or other swelling, abdominal distress and dizziness. But for some people, a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis occurs. Then the throat may constrict; breathing may become difficult. Blood pressure may drop, or a rapid pulse may develop. Anaphylaxis requires immediate emergency treatment.

Sometimes people have a reaction to a food only after they have exercised. Waiting a few hours after eating before you work out and avoiding certain foods can help considerably.

Food intolerances are bothersome, too, but much less serious than food allergies because they don’t involve the immune system. Often you can eat small amounts of such problem foods without causing a reaction.

Heredity plays a key role in allergies, but recent increases in allergic disorders cannot be explained by genetic factors alone.

**Prayer:** We appreciate the beautiful foods that come to our table at this time of year and are grateful for each breath of spring we take. Be with those who are challenged by allergies this season. Amen.

**Resources:** advocatehealth.com • foodallergy.org • nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/foodallergy.html • kidswithfoodallergies.org • pocaofdupage.org/id32.html (support groups for children with allergies)

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**Practical Guide to the Health Care System:**

**The burden/benefit conversation**

When you are considering a critical medical treatment, your doctor will want to review with you the **benefits** and the **burdens** of that treatment to help you reach the best decision.

- **Benefits** are the results that a specific medical intervention is expected to attain.
- **Burdens** are the physical pain, emotional pain/discomfort/suffering and losses that a specific medical intervention will likely impose.
- **Risks** are the burdens that might result from a specific intervention.

When evaluating burdens, sometimes other factors, such as treatment cost and time involvement, are included. Many people like to include the impact of the treatment on their families. Loved ones do suffer at such times. One study found that nearly one out of three family members experiences anxiety and depression during and after an ICU stay.

Some patients and families have unrealistic expectations about outcomes. There are many reasons for this, including positive coping mechanisms such as hope and denial and unrealistic expectations fueled by television and Hollywood.

But treatment decisions should be guided by reality. What is the objective of the treatment? Treatment for cure emphasizes restoring function, often at the cost of comfort. Treatment for comfort emphasizes pain management and less intrusion, sometimes at the cost of function.

Before making any choice relating to medical treatment or change in the care plan, review the burdens and benefits with your medical team and loved ones in a heart-to-heart conversation. That is likely to lead you to your best decision.

**Coming in June:** Medical Providers