

Cosmetics and medicines for people with food allergies

If you have a food allergy, it's likely you will need to avoid products that contain that food, or extracts from it, such as cosmetics, toiletries, medicines and bath and massage oils. Here you can find answers to frequently asked questions from people with food allergies.

This page does not cover sensitivity to chemicals found in hair dye, such as p-Phenylenediamine (PPD).

Which products can contain food ingredients?

- **Cosmetics** – including make-up and skincare products.
- **Personal care products and toiletries** – such as soaps, lotions, deodorants, hair products and dental products (legally these are defined as cosmetic products).
- **Medicines** – including prescription medicines and those you buy over the counter at a pharmacy or shop.
- **Massage oils**
- **Condoms**

Are these products likely to trigger allergic reactions?

Little is known about how likely cosmetic products containing food ingredients are to cause a reaction. In many products, the risk may be small, or there may be no risk at all, because the ingredients used may have been highly refined to the point that most of the proteins have been removed – it's the proteins in a food that cause allergic reactions. There may be a higher risk from products that contain raw or unrefined food ingredients as they still contain their proteins.

If someone accidentally swallows a product that is intended to be used on the skin, the risk of a reaction is likely to be higher.

As there are still unanswered questions, it's safest to avoid any products that contain the food you're allergic to.

Can contact with the skin cause reactions?

It's possible to react to a food ingredient in a product even when you use it on the skin. When your skin comes into contact with cosmetics and topical medicines such as skin creams, this can lead to:

- immediate skin reactions such as a red raised rash (known as hives or urticaria).
- delayed skin reactions such as dermatitis/eczema.

For example, some cosmetic products such as eye shadow are made with crushed fish scales to create a shimmer effect. Although the risk of reactions to fish scales in cosmetic products is thought to be low, it is possible. If you react to a product, stop using it and speak to your doctor.

Which foods are used in cosmetics and medicines?

A few examples include:

- **peanut oil** is used in some brands of vitamins, ear drops, creams for nappy rash, eye pencils and injections given into the muscles.
- **almond oil** is used in some shampoos, shower gels, bath oils, skin moisturisers and fabric softeners.
- **milk or egg derivatives** are used in some shampoos.
- **avocado** is used in some skin moisturisers.
- **sesame seed oil** is used in at least one hay fever spray, and in some hand/face moisturisers and soaps.
- **fruit extracts** are used in some face products and lip balms.
- **lupin extracts** are used in certain cosmetics and skincare products.
- **macadamia nut oil** is used in hair straightening balm.

Which cosmetic products contain food ingredients?

Always read the label before you buy any cosmetic products. All cosmetic products sold in the UK must display a complete list of ingredients. This includes make-up, and a wide range of personal care products such as:

- creams, emulsions, lotions, gels and oils for the skin
- soaps, bath preparations and shampoos
- deodorants and antiperspirants
- perfumes, Eau de Toilette and Eau de Cologne
- hair care products, hair tints and bleaches
- cleansing and conditioning products
- shaving products
- dental care products
- sun protection products
- self-tanning (fake tan) products
- anti-wrinkle products

These products are included in the UK labelling [cosmetic products guidance](#). The guidance allows flexibility on how ingredients are presented. On some products the packaging is very small so the ingredients will be listed on an enclosed or attached leaflet, label, tape, tag or card. Sometimes, they're listed on a notice on the shelf next to the product.

If you can't find the ingredients, ask a member of staff or contact the company's customer care helpline. Avoid trying testers in shops if they're not labelled.

If you are visiting a salon for hair or body treatment, always ask about ingredients in any product you haven't used before.

What ingredient names do I need to look out for in cosmetics?

The names used for ingredients in cosmetics are standardised across Europe, using the INCI (International Nomenclature Cosmetic Ingredient) system. It's also used in the USA and elsewhere. It means manufacturers all use the same names for ingredients.

Common food-based ingredients are listed using their Latin names, shown below.

- **Almond (sweet):** *Prunus dulcis*, and variations such as *Prunus amygdalus dulcis*
- **Almond (bitter):** *Prunus amara*, and variations such as *Prunus amygdalus amara*
- **Avocado:** *Persea gratissima*
- **Apricot:** *Prunus armeniaca*

- **Banana:** *Musa sapientum*, and variations such as *Musa paradisiacal*, *Musa acuminata*, *Musa balbisiana*, *Musa basjoo* or *Musa nana*
- **Brazil nut:** *Bertholletia excelsa*
- **Cashew:** *Anacardium occidentale*
- **Celery:** *Apium graveolens*
- **Chestnut:** *Castanea sativa*, and variations such as *Castanea sylva* or *Castanea crenata*
- **Chickpea:** *Cicer arietinum*
- **Coconut:** *Cocus nucifera*
- **Corn (maize):** *Zea mays*
- **Egg:** *Ovum*
- **Fish liver oil:** *Piscum iecur*
- **Hazelnut:** *Corylus rostrata*, and variations such as *Corylus americana* and *Corylus avellana*
- **Kiwi fruit:** *Actinidia chinensis*, and variations such as *Actinidia deliciosa*
- **Lupin:** *Lupinus albus*, and variations such as *Lupinus luteus*, *Lupinus texensis* or *Lupinus subcarnosus*
- **Macadamia:** *Macadamia ternifolia*, and variations such as *Macadamia integrifolia*
- **Milk:** *Lac*
- **Mustard:** *Brassica alba*, and variations such as *Brassica nigra* or *Brassica juncea*
- **Oat:** *Avena sativa*, and variations such as *Avena strigosa*
- **Peach:** *Prunus persica*
- **Peanut:** *Arachis hypogaea*
- **Pistachio:** *Pistacia vera*, and variations such as *Pistacia manshurica*
- **Rice:** *Oryza sativa*
- **Rye:** *Secale cereale*
- **Sesame:** *Sesamum indicum*
- **Soya:** *Glycine soja*, and variations such as *Glycine max*
- **Sunflower:** *Helianthus annuus*
- **Walnut:** *Juglans regia*, and variations such as *Juglans nigra*
- **Wheat:** *Triticum vulgare*, and variations such as *Triticum aestivum*
- **Whey Protein:** *Lactis proteinum*

Can I use products labelled 'hypoallergenic'?

Some products labelled and marketed with the term "hypoallergenic" can be misleading as some may contain food proteins, so make sure you check the ingredients.

How can I check if medicines contain food ingredients?

Always read the list of ingredients on the patient information leaflet inside the box. The outside of the box sometimes only lists the active ingredients but medicines can contain other ingredients (known as excipients) to give them their consistency or flavour and these will only be listed in the leaflet. You can also check the ingredients list online at www.medicines.org.uk

If you need to avoid specific ingredients, talk to your pharmacist. They can sometimes source an alternative medicine that doesn't contain the ingredient you're allergic to. The pharmacist may need to speak to your doctor if your prescription needs to be changed.

Sometimes packaging will include allergy information such as "patients with wheat allergy should not take this medicine" but check the patient information leaflet even if there aren't any messages like this.

What about prescriptions?

Even if your GP has details of your allergy on record, check the ingredients of any medicine you're prescribed just in case.

How will food ingredients be listed?

When food ingredients are used in medicines, they are usually listed using their English names, rather than Latin.

I have a peanut or soya allergy, what should I avoid?

When medicines contain peanut oil, the packaging will advise that people with soya allergy avoid the product, as well as people with peanut allergy. Similarly, people with peanut allergy are advised to avoid medicines containing soya.

This advice comes from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), as some people with peanut allergy are allergic to soya and vice versa. This is due to a

process known as cross-reactivity, where the proteins in one food are similar to the proteins in another.

If you're not sure, talk to your GP or allergy specialist.

Can I use sun cream containing nut oils?

It's sometimes hard to know if there is any risk from sun creams that contain nut oils. It can help to find out if the oil is refined or unrefined.

If the oil is refined

Products that use highly refined cosmetic grade nut oils are very unlikely to pose any risk, as they don't contain any allergenic proteins.

If the oil is unrefined

If the oil is unrefined it will still contain its proteins, so it's possible that it could cause a skin reaction. However, anaphylaxis from skin contact alone is unlikely.

If you're unsure whether the nut oil in the sun cream is refined or unrefined, contact the company's customer care service, or avoid the product.

How do I know if massage oils are safe to use?

Massage oils can contain essential oils, and these can contain food extracts. For both massage oils and essential oils, check to see if the product has a full list of ingredients declared on the label and, if it doesn't, contact the retailer or manufacturer.

Can condoms contain food ingredients?

Most condoms are made using a milk protein called casein. If you have a serious milk allergy, there is a risk that condoms made with casein could cause an allergic reaction if you or your partner are wearing one.

Some condoms are made without using milk protein. Organisations such as the [Vegan Society](#) have details of condoms that are free from animal products including milk protein. Ingredients can change so always check the label or contact the manufacturers if you're not sure.

What is sensitisation?

Sensitisation means your immune system has produced antibodies to a food or substance and these could cause symptoms if you come into contact with it again in future.

Some research has suggested that applying products, such as moisturisers, containing food ingredients to the skin of young children when they have a rash or broken skin could raise their risk of developing an allergy to that food. Children with allergies in their immediate family may be more at risk of becoming sensitised.

Skin conditions such as eczema need treating, and this usually includes applying moisturising creams or lotions. Speak to your doctor or pharmacist about the best treatment for you or your child. There are options available that don't include oils made from foods.

Key messages

- Always read ingredient lists thoroughly, just as you would for food products.
- If small packages don't have an ingredient label, ask the shop staff for details or check the manufacturer's website.
- If you have already bought a product, call the customer care helpline to ask about the ingredients.
- Talk to your pharmacist about your allergy when you buy or are prescribed a product if you're not sure if it's suitable for you.
- You can check the list of ingredients of a tablet, capsule or medicine by visiting www.medicines.org.uk

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Please help us to improve our information resources by sending us your feedback at:

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Sources

All the information we produce is evidence-based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you would like to know the sources we used in

producing any of our information products, please contact info@anaphylaxis.org.uk and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

This fact sheet was peer-reviewed by Professor John Warner, Professor of Paediatrics at Imperial College London.

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to her review of this article.

Disclaimer

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About Anaphylaxis UK

Anaphylaxis UK is the only UK-wide charity solely focused on supporting people at risk of serious, life-threatening allergic reactions. We provide information and support to people living with allergies through our free national helpline and local support groups. We fundraise to achieve our ultimate aim, to create a safer environment for all people at risk of serious allergies. Visit our website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk and follow us to keep up-to-date with our latest news. We're on Facebook @anaphylaxisUK, LinkedIn, Instagram @anaphylaxisUK, Twitter @AnaphylaxisUK and you can find our podcast [here](#).