

Sesame allergy: the facts

Sesame seeds and sesame oil can cause allergic reactions, and these can sometimes be serious. Speak to your GP if you think you might have a sesame allergy.

What is sesame allergy?

Sesame allergy is a type of food allergy. Food allergy occurs when the body's immune system wrongly identifies a food as a threat. When this happens, the body releases chemicals, such as histamine, in response. It is the release of these chemicals that causes the allergic symptoms.

Sesame allergy can start in childhood and usually carries on into adulthood. About two in ten children outgrow it, usually by the age of around six. Sesame allergy can also begin in adulthood.

Sesame allergy seems to have become more common over the last 20 years, but no one knows for sure how many people in the UK have it.

What are the symptoms of sesame allergy?

The symptoms of sesame allergy usually come on quickly, within minutes of eating the food.

Mild to moderate symptoms may include:

- a red raised rash (known as hives or urticaria) anywhere on the body
- a tingling or itchy feeling in the mouth
- swelling of lips, face or eyes
- stomach pain or vomiting.

More serious symptoms



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More serious symptoms are often referred to as the ABC symptoms and can include:

- AIRWAY - swelling in the throat, tongue or upper airways (tightening of the throat, hoarse voice, difficulty swallowing).
- BREATHING - sudden onset wheezing, breathing difficulty, noisy breathing.
- CIRCULATION - dizziness, feeling faint, sudden sleepiness, tiredness, confusion, pale clammy skin, loss of consciousness.

The term for this more serious reaction is **anaphylaxis** (anna-fill-axis).

Most healthcare professionals consider an allergic reaction to be anaphylaxis when it involves difficulty breathing or affects the heart rhythm or blood pressure. Any one or more of the ABC symptoms above may be present.

In extreme cases there could be a dramatic fall in blood pressure. The person may become weak and floppy and may have a sense of something terrible happening. This may lead to collapse and unconsciousness and, on rare occasions, can be fatal.

[Read more about anaphylaxis.](#)

Delayed reactions

Rarely, sesame seeds or oil can cause a less serious, delayed reaction. This usually includes symptoms of contact dermatitis, where the skin becomes red, swollen and sore.

Serious reactions to sesame seeds can also sometimes be delayed and start up to 90 minutes after eating them. This could be due to the time it takes to digest the seed case.

Getting a diagnosis

If you think you may be allergic to sesame, see your GP who can refer you to a specialist allergy clinic if needed. They can find a clinic in your area from the [British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology \(BSACI\)](#).



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It's important to get a referral even if your symptoms were mild because it can be hard to tell if future allergic reactions could be more serious.

Once you get a referral, the consultant will discuss your medical history and symptoms with you. They might suggest skin prick tests, blood tests, and food challenge tests to help diagnose the allergy. Once the diagnosis is confirmed, there are no tests that can tell how serious your allergy may be.

Proteins called oleosins are responsible for about a third of sesame allergies. The skin and blood testing for these allergens does not work well and the tests may be negative even when there is allergy. Food challenge tests can help to confirm the diagnosis if your sesame allergy is caused by these proteins.

[Read more about allergy testing.](#)

What can mean you're at higher risk?

Some clues that you might be at higher risk of more serious reactions are:

- you have already had a serious reaction, with any of the 'ABC' symptoms
- you have asthma, especially if it is not well controlled
- you have reacted to a tiny amount of sesame.

If you have asthma, and it is not well controlled, this could make an allergic reaction worse. Make sure you discuss this with your GP or allergy specialist and take any prescribed medicines.

Treating symptoms

If you have mild allergic symptoms, you may be prescribed antihistamine medicine that you take by mouth. If you are at higher risk of anaphylaxis, you may be prescribed adrenaline to use in an emergency.

Adrenaline comes in pre-loaded adrenaline auto-injectors (AAIs) that are designed to be easy to use. Make sure you know how and when to use them.

Ask your healthcare professional to show you how to use your specific brand of AAI. You can also find help on the manufacturer's website and get a free trainer device to practise with.



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The adrenaline auto-injectors prescribed in the UK are:

- [EpiPen](#)
- [Jext](#)

You must carry two AAls with you at all times, as you may need to use a second one if your symptoms don't improve after five minutes or get worse.

[Read more about what to do in an emergency.](#)

Avoiding sesame

Once you have been diagnosed with sesame allergy, you will need to avoid it and the foods that contain it.

Avoid sesame oil as well as the seeds. It's usually unrefined and contains the proteins that trigger allergic reactions. Sesame seeds can be black, white, brown or red.

Read the ingredient lists on food packets carefully every time you shop. Sesame is included in the list of top 14 major food allergens in the UK. This means it must be highlighted on ingredients labels, in bold for example.

Read the ingredient list every time you buy a product as manufacturers change their recipes often.

When eating out

Restaurants, cafes, hotels, takeaways, and other catering businesses are required by law to provide information on major allergens including sesame. Ask staff directly if the food you'd like to buy contains sesame seeds or oil and if there is a risk of cross-contamination and let them know that even small quantities can cause a reaction. Don't be afraid to ask staff to check with the chef.

[Read about shopping and preparing food.](#)

Other names for sesame seeds

- Benne, benne seed and benniseed
- Gingelly and gingelly oil
- Sesamol and sesamolina
- Sesamum indicum
- Sim sim
- Til

Foods made with sesame

- Tahini – a paste used in Middle Eastern cooking
- Gomashio – a dry condiment used in Japanese cooking or sprinkled over rice
- Furikake – a dry Japanese condiment that can be sprinkled over rice, fish and vegetables
- Hummus – hummus is usually made with tahini
- Halvah – a Middle Eastern confectionary
- Sesame snaps/bars

Foods that are sometimes made with sesame

- Veggie burgers
- Breadsticks
- Crackers and biscuits
- Burger buns, bagels and some breads
- Multicultural cuisines (especially South Asian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and Caribbean)
- Stir-fry oils and stir-fry vegetables
- Salad dishes
- Backlava – a layered sweet pastry often made with nuts and seeds

Things to look out for

Take extra care when buying foods that are sold loose, such as bread and baked products at delicatessen counters and in-store bakeries. The seeds may not be obvious. They could be hidden in the dough for example, and products can be contaminated with seeds from other products at the counter.



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Sesame seeds are difficult to control in food production. They often become 'electrostatic', causing them to cling to charged surfaces such as other foods and clothing, which makes it difficult to prevent cross-contamination. If a food product carries a warning such as "may contain sesame", it's best to avoid that food.

Heating does not destroy the part of sesame that cause allergies which means they can still cause allergic reactions when they're cooked.

Can I eat other seeds and nuts?

Some people with sesame allergy also react to other seeds, peanuts, or tree nuts. You may be able to eat these safely but discuss this with your allergy specialist or GP to make sure.

Take care when eating any new nuts or seeds for the first time. If in doubt, talk to your GP about allergy testing.

Cosmetics and medicines

Some cosmetics and personal care products contain sesame. In the ingredients list on the label, look for the Latin name *Sesamum indicum*. It is not known whether they could cause an allergic reaction so it's best to avoid them just in case.

Sesame oil is also used in some medicines, so ask your pharmacist for information about the ingredients.

Key messages

- If you think you might be allergic to sesame, visit your GP.
- If you are prescribed adrenaline auto-injectors, carry two at all times.
- Check food labels for sesame and ask for allergy information when you eat out.
- Always be guided by your allergy specialist on which foods to avoid.
- If you have asthma, make sure it's well managed.



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Feedback

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<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/information-resources-feedback/>

Sources

All the information we produce is evidence based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you wish 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 factsheet was peer-reviewed by Dr Alexandra Croom, Consultant Allergist, Queens Medical Centre, Nottingham.

Disclosures

We are not aware of any conflicts of interest in relation to the review of this factsheet.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this Factsheet 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 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 also campaign and 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 YouTube.