Wheat Allergy

There are different types of reactions to wheat including allergy, intolerance and coeliac disease. In this factsheet we focus on **immediate wheat allergy**. Reactions can range from mild to severe so speak to your GP if you think you or your child has had a reaction to wheat. They can help you get an accurate diagnosis or refer you to an allergy clinic or dietician if necessary. Some people with a wheat allergy also react to other grains, such as barley and rye, because they contain similar proteins to wheat. Your doctor or dietitian can advise whether you also need to avoid these grains, as well as oats.

What is immediate wheat allergy?

Immediate wheat allergy is a type of food allergy where the body's immune system wrongly identifies one or more of the proteins in wheat as a threat and produces an immune response. This is driven by an antibody called IgE and results in chemicals, such as histamine, being released. It is these chemicals that result in allergic symptoms.

Symptoms usually come on quickly, within minutes or up to two hours after eating food containing wheat, and can range from mild to serious.

Most people with an immediate wheat allergy have symptoms when they eat food containing wheat, but some people may have a reaction after touching wheat or breathing it in. This can happen, for example, when baking with wheat flour which gets into the air, although this is uncommon and usually only occurs in highly sensitive individuals.

Is wheat allergy the same as a gluten allergy?

Gluten is one group of proteins found in wheat. If you are allergic to wheat, you may react to gluten, to other wheat proteins, or to a combination. A reaction to gluten does not automatically mean you have a wheat allergy: it could also be coeliac disease or gluten sensitivity, which are different conditions.

What is wheat dependent exercise-induced anaphylaxis (WDEIA)?

Some people only experience reactions to wheat when they have exercised after eating it. These reactions can be serious and is known as 'wheat dependant exercise induced anaphylaxis'. Diagnosis is made by using a combination of case history and skin prick

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tests and/or specific IgE blood tests. Further specialist allergy tests may be necessary. These tests should be interpreted by a health professional with the relevant experience.

What are the symptoms of wheat allergy?

The symptoms of an immediate wheat allergy usually start within minutes or up to two hours of eating wheat.

Mild to **moderate** symptoms:

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

More serious symptoms

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

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

The term for this more serious reaction is **anaphylaxis** (ana-fil-ax-is).

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. Any of the ABC symptoms may lead to collapse and unconsciousness and, on rare occasions, can be fatal.

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Read more about anaphylaxis.

What can mean you are at higher risk of a serious reaction?

Some clues that you or your child 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 wheat.

If you or your child has 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. But if you are at risk of a serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis), you may be prescribed adrenaline – the emergency medicine used to treat anaphylaxis. It is also known as epinephrine.

Because anaphylaxis can happen very quickly, adrenaline is available in different forms that are designed to be easy to use. It's important to know exactly how and when to use your prescribed adrenaline. Healthcare professionals can show you how to use it, and there are also resources such as practice devices and videos on manufacturer websites.

Options currently available on prescription in the UK include:

• **Adrenaline auto-injectors (AAIs)** – EpiPen and Jext.

• **Intranasal adrenaline** – EURneffy, a needle-free nasal spray. Availability varies by area, so please check with your local GP or allergy service to find out whether it is available locally.

You must carry two in-date forms of prescribed adrenaline at all times as a second dose may be needed if symptoms do not improve after five minutes of using the first one or get worse.

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Find out more about what to do in an emergency.

Find out more about adrenaline.

Other types of hypersensitivity to wheat

There are a number of other conditions that cause reactions to wheat, including those listed below. If you or your child have symptoms you believe are brought on by eating wheat, visit your GP as soon as possible as it's important to find out which condition is causing them. There may also be a cause other than wheat.

- **Delayed wheat allergy** – also known as non-IgE mediated wheat allergy. This type of reaction involves the immune system but does not involve IgE antibodies. Symptoms appear hours or days after eating wheat and usually include skin rashes, worsening of eczema, or gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating, gas, abdominal pain or diarrhoea.

- **Food Protein Induced Enterocolitis Syndrome (FPIES)** – this is a type of delayed allergic reaction that can cause severe vomiting for several hours after eating a trigger food like wheat. It will happen every time you eat wheat. It needs to be diagnosed at an allergy clinic as the specialist will need to rule out immediate wheat allergy.

- **Allergy to wheat protein isolates** – a very rare type of allergy to an ingredient known as 'wheat protein isolate' or 'deamidated wheat'. This is often added to pasta and pizza dough and is used to add protein to nutrition bars, granola bars, cereal coatings, baked goods and meat substitutes. If you have unexplained reactions to these foods, but you can eat some breads and other foods containing wheat, you may have this type of wheat allergy.

- **Coeliac disease** – an autoimmune condition where eating foods containing gluten causes your immune system to attack its own tissues. This can damage the lining of the small bowel which causes pain, digestive problems and long-term nutrient deficiencies.

- **Wheat 'intolerance'** – this can be due to having trouble digesting proteins or carbohydrate in wheat. It does not involve the immune system. Symptoms usually include digestive problems including discomfort, diarrhoea and bloating.

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Getting a diagnosis

If you think you or your child may be allergic to wheat, see your GP. If symptoms are mild, your GP may manage this type of allergy in primary care. The GP can refer you to an allergy clinic if needed. They can find a clinic in your area from British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology (BSACI).

Read more about allergy testing.

If your symptoms are not immediate (they come on some time after eating wheat), ask your GP to refer you to a dietitian. They can tell you if you need to avoid wheat completely or if it's ok to eat small amounts.

Please note other types of allergy testing such as IgG, kinesiology and hair analysis are not recommended.

Hay fever and wheat allergy

Many people with an allergy to grass pollen will have a positive skin test to wheat, as wheat and grass pollen contain some of the same proteins. This doesn't necessarily mean you are allergic to wheat, especially if you can eat wheat without having any symptoms. Don't cut wheat out of your diet based on this type of test unless your healthcare professional advises you to.

Read more about allergy testing.

Preparing for your medical appointment

It can be helpful to keep a diary of all the reactions or symptoms you have after eating.

Make a note of:

- what you ate
- how much you ate
- what symptoms you had
- how quickly the symptoms came on
- any treatments you used and if they worked.

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Keeping a food and symptom diary like this will help your allergy specialist or dietitian make a diagnosis.

Can wheat allergy be outgrown?

Wheat allergy is most common in children and is usually outgrown in the pre-school years. If your child has an immediate wheat allergy it is important that they have regular reviews with their allergy clinic. Don't try to reintroduce wheat into your child's diet at home without the advice of an allergy specialist, even if you think they've outgrown their allergy.

Wheat allergy can also develop later in life. If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of a wheat allergy, speak to your GP, who can support you and refer you for further assessment if needed.

Read more about outgrowing food allergy

Avoiding wheat

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

Read the ingredient lists on food packets carefully every time you shop. Wheat (and other cereals containing gluten) are 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.

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Foods which are likely to contain wheat

Food group	Foods which contain or may contain wheat	Foods to check with your dietitian whether to exclude	Wheat-free alternatives
Breads	Wheat-based breads, including white, brown, wholemeal, granary, soda and half-and-half; pitta, chapattis, croissants, crumpets, brioche, muffins, naans, tortillas, breadsticks, bagels and wraps	Rye bread, rye crispbreads and oatcakes	Bread made with wheat-free flour; wheat-free crackers and crispbreads made with rice, corn, buckwheat, tapioca or quinoa
Cereals	Wheat-based cereals and cereal bars	Oat cereals, porridge, granola, Ready Brek and barley malt	Rice, corn, buckwheat and millet cereals
Pasta, pizza, noodles and potato	Fresh or dried pasta, minestrone, tinned spaghetti, pizzas, dough balls, noodles, some frozen chips and waffles		Pasta made from rice, corn, buckwheat or legumes; jacket, boiled or mashed potato; wheat-free pizza, dough balls and pizza bases
Grains, flours and flakes	Bulgur wheat, couscous, durum wheat, freekeh, einkorn, emmer, farro, kamut, malted wheat, semolina, spelt, triticale, whole wheat, wheat bran and wheat germ	Rye, oat and barley flour	Amaranth, beans, buckwheat (also called sarasin or sarasin flour), carob, chestnut, coconut, fava/broad bean, flaxseed, fufu flour, gram/chickpea/garbanzo flour, hemp, lentil/urid/urd/urad flour, maize/corn, cornmeal, polenta, millet, mustard, nut flour, plantain, potato, quinoa, rice, sago, sesame, sorghum, soya, sweet potato, tapioca, teff and yam

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Meat, fish, pulses, eggs and nuts	Breaded or battered fish and meat, sausages, burgers, Scotch eggs, quiche, pastry, some pies, meatballs, ready meals and processed meats	Roasted or flavoured nuts	Plain fresh or frozen meat and fish without coatings; wheat-free alternatives; gluten-free sausages—check they are also wheat-free; plain egg; tinned pulses; tofu; hummus; nut butters
Cakes and desserts	Semolina, crumbles, pastries, cheesecake, sponges, éclairs, steamed puddings, trifles, biscuits, cakes, scones, pancakes, doughnuts, muffins, ice-cream wafers and cones, Chelsea buns, hot cross buns, flans and tarts		Sorbets, custard, meringues, flourless sponges, and gluten-free cakes and biscuits—check they are also wheat-free
Milk and dairy products	Yoghurts with added cereals or muesli; some flavoured milk drinks and milkshake powders	Oat-based milk alternatives	All animal milks, cheeses, yoghurts and cream
Fruits and vegetables	Some pâtés and spreads; vegetables coated in breadcrumbs or batter or served in sauces; soups; some pre-packed vegetables; pie fillings; fruit crumbles; some vegetable crisps		All plain fruit and vegetables—fresh, frozen, dried and tinned; plain vegetable crisps
Sauces, stocks and seasonings	Soy sauce, some gravies, stock cubes and bouillon powders, some curry sauces, marinades, salad dressings, gravy		Tamari (check label), wheat-free soy sauce, homemade gravy using cornflour or other wheat-free thickener, and products clearly labelled wheat-free

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	granules and seasoning blends		
Snacks and convenience foods	Some crisps, flavoured snacks, crackers, cereal bars, snack mixes, coated nuts, instant noodles and some ready meals		Plain crisps or vegetable crisps, plain nuts and seeds, rice cakes, popcorn, homemade snacks and products clearly labelled wheat-free
Sweets and drinks	Some sweets, chocolate products, malted drinks, barley-based drinks and some flavoured or powdered drink mixes	Barley-based drinks and malted milk drinks	Plain chocolate or sweets where the label confirms no wheat-derived ingredients; fruit juice, water, plain milk and clearly labelled wheat-free drinks
Miscellaneous	Baking powder containing wheat, wheat protein isolates, wheat starch and some flavoured crisp snacks		Wheat-free baking powder, cream of tartar, bicarbonate of soda, xanthan gum, gelatine, jam, marmalade, honey, syrup, sugar and vanilla essence

When eating out

Restaurants, cafes, hotels, takeaways and other catering businesses are required by law to provide information on major allergens, including wheat. Ask staff directly if the food you'd like to buy contains wheat 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. Ingredients and recipes can change, even in dishes you have eaten before. Always tell staff about your allergies and check each time you order, even at places where you regularly eat.

Read about shopping and preparing food.

Do I need to avoid anything else?

Play dough often contains wheat, so make your own using wheat free flour. Some cosmetics, hair care products and even home decorations contain wheat so always read labels.

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Read our cosmetics and medicines for people with food allergy.

Can I eat 'gluten-free' foods?

Food labelled 'gluten free' such as gluten-free bread and pasta are not always suitable for people with wheat allergy. This is because they may contain wheat starch. Even if a product is labelled gluten free, it may still contain wheat-derived ingredients that could trigger an allergic reaction. Cross-contamination can also occur during manufacturing or food preparation. Depending on your individual allergy and advice from your healthcare professional, you may also need to avoid barley, rye or oats.

If you have an immediate wheat allergy, you will need to make sure any gluten free foods you eat are also wheat free. If you are eating foods prepared by other people, make sure they know that the food needs to be wheat free rather than gluten free only.

Key messages

- If you think you or your child may have a wheat allergy, visit your GP.
- Check food labels carefully for wheat and wheat proteins and question staff in restaurants, takeaways and anywhere you eat out of home.
- If you are prescribed adrenaline, make sure you know how to use it and carry **two** devices with you **at all times.**
- Make sure those around you know how to spot and treat the signs of anaphylaxis.
- If you have asthma, make sure it is well controlled.

Feedback

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

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

Sources

All the information we produce is evidence-based or follows expert opinion and is

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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@allergyuk.org and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

The content of this factsheet has been peer-reviewed by Goldie Putrym, Eczema & Allergy Parenting Expert.

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 is 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 Allergy UK Incorporating Anaphylaxis UK

Allergy UK Incorporating Anaphylaxis UK is the only UK-wide charity solely focused on supporting people with allergies and at risk of serious, life-threatening allergic reactions. We provide information and support to people living with allergies through our free national helpline. We also fundraise to achieve our ultimate aim, to create a safer environment for all people with allergy and 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 @allergyuk, LinkedIn, Instagram @anaphylaxisUK @ allergyuk, and you can find our podcast here.

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