

Food Allergy, Intolerance, Imagination or Eating Disorder?

Too many people are self-diagnosing food allergies and could be restricting their diet unnecessarily, according to a new report by the University of Portsmouth and commissioned by the Flour Advisory Bureau.

Research shows that up to 20 per cent of adults think they suffer from a food allergy or food intolerance. However evidence suggests that the real prevalence of food allergy and intolerance in adults is less than 2 per cent. It means that millions of people could be avoiding certain foods unnecessarily and without proper medical advice.

Of course, food intolerance and food allergy are both fact, but if the patients who came through my surgery door and the thousands who phoned or wrote in to my radio programme on London's LBC are anything to go by, they're fact for no more than 10 percent of those who believe they're suffering with either of these conditions.

Nine out of ten are either the victims of bogus testing, self delusion, attention seeking, a wish to be part of the latest food fad or they're using the conditions as a cover for an eating disorder.

There's no doubt that severe food allergies, especially to nuts and seeds, but also fish, shellfish, strawberries and in rare instances almost any food you can think of, can be a life threatening condition. But to imagine that vast numbers of the British population suffer multiple food allergies or intolerance is utter madness.

Living on a highly restricted diet which removes whole food groups from your normal daily eating is a risky business. Drastic weight loss, nutritional deficiencies, infertility, greater risk of osteoporosis in later life, diminished mental ability, chronic fatigue, can all result from self inflicted malnutrition in the midst of plenty.

The University of Portsmouth report also reveals that over half of the British population believes that wheat allergy is a common illness and in 2009 wheat was the most commonly self reported food allergen for both men and women. Those living alone and those aged 35-44 were most likely to report such an allergy or intolerance. But the report highlights that confirmed wheat allergy is less common than other food allergies such as peanuts and other nuts, eggs and milk.

Dr Heather Mackenzie and Dr Carina Venter from the School of Health Sciences at the University of Portsmouth are the authors of a new 'Wheat Hypersensitivity Report' commissioned by the Flour Advisory Bureau to mark last month's Food Allergy and Intolerance Week.

"There is a clear discrepancy between the number of people who report that they have food allergy or intolerance and the numbers whose food allergy/intolerance can be confirmed by a medical diagnosis," said Dr Mackenzie.

Between one and two per cent of UK adults are allergic to any food and that wheat allergies are less common than most, so it is a real worry that so many people are avoiding wheat and not giving it to their children. This unnecessary behaviour may have an adverse impact on their nutritional intake and quality of life.

Wheat is found in many foods including bread, pastry, pasta, noodles and biscuits and wheat-based products form a key part of our diet with 76.4 per cent of the UK population eating bread once a day or more. For the small proportion of the population who suffer genuine food allergies the affects can be serious.

The report highlights and explains the difference between wheat allergy, wheat intolerance and coeliac disease, which are frequently confused.

Wheat allergy is a reaction to wheat involving an antibody called Immunoglobulin E(IgE). Typically symptoms occur within 2 hours of eating wheat and range from mild to severe, including hives, itching, gastrointestinal symptoms and wheezing.

Wheat intolerance is not an immune system reaction, but symptoms are often similar to those of allergy although they are usually less severe and occur after a longer period of time and after eating much more of the relevant food.

Coeliac disease is an immune reaction, but different antibodies are involved than in wheat allergy. This is a serious and often undiagnosed illness with a wide variation in symptoms that include weight loss, diarrhoea, stomach cramps and iron deficiency, fatigue and in children, a failure to thrive.

This condition is caused by a reaction to the gluten in cereals and the only treatment is avoidance. Once you make the diet changes the results are fantastic as symptoms just disappear. There are now many excellent products on the market that are gluten free and lots of help and advice can be had from the Coeliac Society.

www.coeliac.org.uk