

GUIDELINES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF FOOD INTOLERANCE

Introduction

Food intolerances are irritant, toxic, pharmacological or metabolic reactions to food that are not immunologically mediated; i.e are not due to an allergy. There is a misconception among the general public that any symptoms related to food consumption are due to allergies and this is reinforced by the popular press and alternative medicine practitioners.

In general, reactions due to food allergies consist of urticaria and/or angioedema and, in severe cases, bronchospasm and/or hypotension (anaphylaxis). These can sometimes be associated with gastrointestinal symptoms but it is rare for food allergies to present with isolated gastrointestinal symptoms. The exception is very young babies.

Examples of food intolerance

Tyramine sensitivity:

Tyramine rich foods such as chocolate, red wine, cheese, pickled herring, yeast extracts, nuts, soy, smoked fish, bananas, Fava beans, etc can cause vasodilatation of cerebral blood vessels in susceptible individuals and trigger migraine.

Scombroid poisoning:

Badly stored fish, such as mackerel, can release histamine which can cause facial flushing, dizziness, nausea, headache, urticaria, diarrhoea and abdominal cramps.

Irritable bowel symptoms

Some cases of irritable bowel are thought to be provoked by the fermentation products of unabsorbed food residues which lead to the release of gases which cause bloating, colic, nausea and intestinal hurry. In these cases, milk and wheat are often triggers.

Gluten intolerance / coeliac disease

This is not a true 'intolerance' but an immunologically mediated condition. Serological tests are available in the laboratory for screening; i.e. tissue transglutaminase antibodies.

Milk intolerance

In some susceptible individuals, milk and dairy products can cause excessive mucous production in the upper respiratory tract.

Tests

Due to the fact that immunological mechanisms are not involved in these reactions, there are no specific diagnostic tests for this condition. A number of alternative allergy tests are on offer commercially and used by Alternative Medicine Practitioners. These tests have not been found to be of proven benefit and their use is not recommended¹

Management

The mainstay of treatment involves the patient identifying, by trial and error, the foods which trigger symptoms and avoiding them from their diet. There is no specific treatment other than avoidance. Some intolerances will resolve spontaneously.

Reference:

Allergy: Conventional and Alternative Concepts. Royal College of Physicians 1992