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# CHAPTER 1

## FOOD ALLERGIES EXPLAINED

Before starting this journey on the practical management of food allergies, it is important to understand what food allergies are, how they manifest and how they are diagnosed. The following section will tackle these aspects of food allergy.

### 1.1 WHAT IS A FOOD ALLERGY?

A food allergy is an abnormal response by the body to a food which is usually “harmless” and tolerated by the vast majority of the population. The food which the patient reacts to is termed an “allergen.” In people with a food allergy, the immune system misjudges the allergen to be unsafe and sets up a response to the allergen, similar to the body’s response to a parasite. This results in a variety of symptoms.

### 1.2 WHAT FOODS MOST COMMONLY CAUSE ALLERGIC REACTIONS?

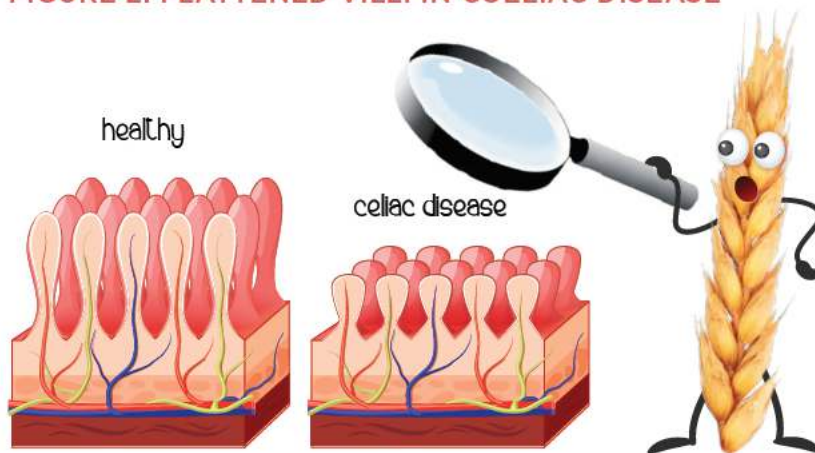
Certain allergens such as cow’s milk and hen’s egg are universally common, and others such as peanut are increasing in many parts of the world. Other common food allergens in children are wheat, soya, fish and tree nuts. Some parts of the world have a higher rate of other more unusual allergies- such as mustard allergy in France and sesame seed allergy in Israel.

Adults have a slightly different list of common allergies, as many have outgrown milk, egg or wheat allergies. In adults, nut and seafood allergies are the most common offenders. Certain fruits or vegetables may also start causing issues in older children or adults who have previously suffered from a pollen allergy- this is called the oral-allergy syndrome (also known as the pollen-fruit syndrome).

### 1.3 HOW COMMON ARE FOOD ALLERGIES?

Food allergies have increased significantly in the past few decades, seemingly in most parts of the world including South Africa. In some parts of the world, such as Australia, up to 10% of young children have a food allergy, and in the United Kingdom and United States around 5-8% of children suffer from at least one food allergy. This is a big public health issue. In South Africa currently about 2.5% of young children have a food allergy, and this may well still be increasing. This

**FIGURE 2: FLATTENED VILLI IN COELIAC DISEASE**



### 1.6 HOW DO FOOD ALLERGIES PRESENT?

There are two main types of food allergy: the immediate type (medically termed “IgE- mediated” as it is directed by the antibody type E), and the delayed type of allergy (medically termed “non-IgE mediated” as it involves different mechanisms). Let’s have a look at the typical presentation of each of these types of allergy.

#### Immediate-type allergies

By definition, immediate type allergies cause symptoms which start soon after ingesting the offending food: within seconds to 2 hours after. Symptoms usually last only a few hours but in some cases a prolonged reaction may occur or a flare-up of the symptoms can recur a few hours later.

Typical symptoms of an immediate-type reaction include any of the following, alone or in combination:

- Itchy rashes- classically hives
- Swelling, for example of the lips, eyes or tongue
- Itchy eyes and a runny nose
- Itching in the throat or palate
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea or vomiting
- Cramps and diarrhoea
- An irritation in the throat or persistent cough
- Swelling of the upper airway causing croup-like noises when breathing in