

Should I avoid foods to lower the risk of allergy?

By J. Allen Meadows, MD

Q: I have allergies and am pregnant with my first child. I keep on hearing conflicting advice on whether I should avoid certain foods while pregnant to help my baby not have allergies, too. Is there anything I can eat or not eat to lower the chances of my child having allergies?

Most physicians do not recommend restricting the diet of a pregnant mother as a way to prevent allergies in her unborn child. However, there is some research that points to increased chances of childhood allergies with exposure to peanuts during pregnancy. So, if a restriction were to be recommended, it would be peanuts.

One of the best ways to protect your unborn child's health in general is by eating a balanced diet rich in vitamins and nutrients and getting proper prenatal care. Research shows prenatal diets rich in antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids (such as those found in certain fish, such as salmon and herring) may help prevent allergies during childhood. Many prenatal vitamins now include a supplement with omega-3s. Research also shows prenatal diets that are too high in omega-6 fatty acids (fats found in fried foods and pre-packaged snack foods) may have the opposite effect and increase the chance of allergies during childhood.

After the birth of your baby, breastfeeding is recommended. The science points to breastfeeding as a way to delay food allergies in infants at risk for allergies (because one or both parents suffer from allergies). While breast milk is not hypoallergenic, it is the "gold standard" of infant nutrition and can strengthen your baby's immune system. It is also less likely a baby will have an allergic reaction to breast milk than to many formulas.

There are some additional strategies. Since peanut proteins can be passed from mother to infant through breast milk, a mother may want to avoid peanuts (as well as other common offenders such as cows' milk and eggs) while breastfeeding. If it has been determined that a baby has food allergies, then a breastfeeding mom will need to avoid the most common offenders (peanuts, cows' milk, soy, wheat, eggs, tree nuts, fish and shell fish).

And while timing may not be everything, it does play a part in preventing childhood food allergies. Avoid introducing solid foods until 6 months of age. When you begin to introduce solid foods, do it one at a time. Leave dairy products off the table until your baby reaches 1 year of age; eggs until 2 years of age; and peanuts, nuts and fish until 3 years of age.