

Food Allergies: A Growing Public Health Crisis and the Path to Solutions



Tommy C. Sim, MD

ABSTRACT

Food allergies are an increasingly urgent global health concern, particularly among children in industrialized nations. This article explores the rise in prevalence through epidemiological trends and examines underlying causes including environmental changes, microbiome disruption and the hygiene hypothesis. It further considers the psychological, social and economic burden of food allergies, while critically assessing current management strategies centered on allergen avoidance and emergency preparedness. Emerging therapies such as oral and epicutaneous immunotherapy, biologic treatments and early allergen introduction are reviewed as promising developments. The article also highlights the role of legislation, public policy and advocacy in creating safer and more inclusive environments. Addressing this complex issue requires a coordinated, multidisciplinary response that prioritizes not just prevention and innovation, but also empathy, equity and societal inclusion.

✉ Tommy C. Sim
docpinoy@aol.com

Clinical Professor, Departments of Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, and Immunology, The University of Texas, Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas, USA

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INTRODUCTION: THE SILENT EPIDEMIC OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Over the past two decades, food allergies have transitioned from a niche clinical concern to a major public health challenge with serious, sometimes life-threatening implications. Globally, allergic reactions to staple foods such as peanuts, milk, eggs, shellfish, soy, fish, tree nuts and wheat have been reported with increasing frequency. In the United States (U.S.), these eight foods are estimated to account for at least 90% of severe food allergy reactions. [1] In recognition of increasing cases, sesame was officially added as the ninth major food allergen in the U.S. in 2021.[2] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the prevalence of food allergies in children in the U.S. increased by approximately 50% between 2007 and 2021.[3] Similar upward trends have been documented in the UK, Australia and other industrialized nations. [4] Despite their prevalence, food allergies are still misunderstood and frequently underestimated. The casual dismissal of allergies as exaggerated sensitivities undermines the very real threat they pose: a peanut in a cookie or a mislabeled sandwich can cause severe allergic reaction or anaphylactic shock.[5]

This viewpoint article aims to dissect the growing epidemic of food allergies through the lenses of epidemiology, immunology, societal impact, treatment innovation and policy reform, offering both critique and solutions.

The Epidemiology of Food Allergies: A Global Perspective

Food allergies affect an estimated 6%–8% of children and 3%–4% of adults worldwide.[5] In high-income countries, these figures have risen steadily over recent decades. Urban environments, Western dietary patterns and reduced microbial exposure have been linked to this increase. For example, a study reported that peanut allergies among European schoolchildren tripled over a 15-year period.[6] Approximately 40% of children with food allergies are sensitized to multiple food allergens, with clinical reactivity to more than one food.[7]

While many children eventually outgrow allergies to milk, eggs, soy and wheat, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts and shellfish often persist into adulthood. Approximately 70%–80% of children with these allergens retain their sensitivity for life. Compounding the issue is the rise in adult-onset food allergies. Nearly 45% of adults with food allergies report developing them in adulthood, with shellfish, milk and tree nuts being the most common triggers.[1,8]

In lower-income and developing nations, food allergy data is limited, primarily due to underdiagnosis and insufficient healthcare infrastructure. However, as regions in Africa and Asia undergo rapid urbanization and adopt Westernized lifestyles, early studies suggest that food allergy prevalence is increasing in parallel.[9] Without timely surveillance and prevention strategies, these regions may face a growing burden in the coming decades.

Certain populations are disproportionately affected. For instance, food allergy rates are higher among boys under five years old, and African-American children are more likely to have multiple and more severe allergies.[10] The reasons for these disparities remain under investigation but likely involve complex interactions between genetic, environmental and social determinants of health. Children with food allergies are more than twice as likely to have asthma and over three times as likely to develop respiratory allergies or eczema compared to children without food allergies.[11,12]

Socioeconomic status further compounds access to care. Families in lower-income brackets often face barriers to diagnosis, treatment and access to emergency medications like epinephrine. Rural communities may lack specialized allergy clinics and reliable access to life-saving interventions, highlighting the inequities embedded within allergy care systems.[13,14]

Understanding the Surge: Etiological Factors in Food Allergies

Food allergies have become alarmingly more prevalent over the past few decades, particularly in industrialized nations. This sharp rise cannot be explained by genetics alone, since our genetic makeup evolves over much longer time scales. Therefore, researchers increasingly point to environmental and lifestyle changes as the primary culprits driving this phenomenon.[5] These factors appear to interact with genetic predispositions, tipping the balance toward allergic sensitization in susceptible individuals. As a result, identifying and understanding these contributing causes is critical to both prevention and treatment strategies.

1. The Hygiene Hypothesis

The hygiene hypothesis, first articulated in the late 20th century, proposes that overly sterile environments in early life may inadvertently impair the natural development of the immune system. According to this theory, reduced exposure to microbes (once common in traditional, agrarian lifestyles) leads to an under-stimulated immune system that may misidentify harmless substances, such as food proteins, as threats. Modern lifestyles, characterized by urban living, smaller family sizes and frequent antibiotic use limit these microbial exposures during key developmental windows.[6] Supporting evidence includes epidemiological data showing that children who grow up on farms, attend daycare early, or have pets are less likely to develop allergies. These environments offer a richer microbial landscape that may promote immune tolerance.[15] This perspective is reshaping how we think about early childhood exposure, prompting discussions about whether limited exposure to germs might be doing more harm than good.

2. Disruption of the Gut Microbiome

Closely related to the hygiene hypothesis is the emerging understanding of the gut microbiome's role in immune function. The trillions of bacteria inhabiting our digestive tract play a critical role in educating and regulating the immune system. Disruptions in this microbial community (often termed dysbiosis) have been linked to a heightened risk of food allergies. Factors such as cesarean deliveries, formula feeding (which lacks the prebiotics found

in breast milk) and frequent or early antibiotic use can all disturb the normal colonization of gut bacteria.[5,16] In response, researchers have begun exploring interventions like probiotics (live beneficial bacteria) and prebiotics (non-digestible fibers that nourish these bacteria) to help restore microbial balance and potentially reduce allergy risk. Although promising, these interventions are still in initial stages, and more research is needed to identify which strains or combinations may be most effective.[7,17] Still, the gut-immune connection is now recognized as a crucial area for future allergy prevention and therapy.

3. Environmental and Dietary Influences

Beyond microbial exposure, broader environmental and dietary changes are also believed to contribute to rising allergy rates. Industrialization has brought about increased air pollution, sedentary indoor lifestyles and a growing reliance on highly processed foods, each of which may negatively impact immune health. Pollutants such as diesel exhaust particles can enhance the allergenicity of proteins by acting as adjuvants, priming the immune system for exaggerated responses. Meanwhile, processed foods often contain additives like emulsifiers and preservatives that can alter gut permeability and disrupt the epithelial barrier. When this barrier is compromised, larger food particles or allergens can pass into the bloodstream, potentially triggering an immune response.[18,19] Furthermore, a lack of sunlight exposure due in part to screen time, sunscreen use and urban living has led to widespread vitamin D deficiencies. Vitamin D is known to play a regulatory role in immune responses, and insufficient levels have been associated with increased susceptibility to allergic diseases, particularly in regions with limited sunlight during winter months.[20,21] Together, these environmental and dietary changes may create a perfect storm for immune dysregulation and the development of food allergies.

The Personal and Societal Burden of Food Allergies

Emotional and Psychological Impacts

Food allergies are a constant source of anxiety. Families report significant stress managing meal safety, especially in a communal setting.[22]

Children with food allergies are at increased risk for anxiety disorders, while parents often suffer a burnout from the burden of hypervigilance. Approximately one-third of children with food allergies report experiencing bullying related to their condition.

Additionally, the emotional toll is exacerbated when individuals face social isolation. Children with food allergies often miss normal childhood experiences like birthday parties, school trips, or communal activities such as camps and sleepovers.[23] Adults may also avoid social dining, dating, or travel due to fear of exposure. Some parents home-school their children to prevent food allergen exposure. Thus, all these exclusions can lead to feelings of alienation and low self-esteem, with long-term psychological effects.[24] Mothers of children under five with food allergies exhibit significantly higher blood pressure and report markedly greater psychosocial stress compared to mothers of non-food-allergic preschool-aged children.[25]

Economic Costs

The financial toll of food allergies is significant. In the U.S. alone, the total economic burden exceeds \$20 billion annually.[26] This includes direct medical expenses such as emergency care, diagnostic testing and prescription medications, as well as indirect costs like special diets, missed workdays and reduced productivity. A 2011–2012 study found that caring for children with food allergies cost U.S. families nearly \$25 billion each year. Adjusted for inflation, that figure climbs to approximately \$33 billion in 2024.[27] For many families, these expenses can be devastating, particularly when insurance coverage for allergy treatment is inadequate. The economic burden of emergency department visits and hospitalizations for food allergy reactions is 2.5-fold higher among children from low-income families compared with those from higher-income households.[13,28]

Medical Management of Food Allergies: The Limitations of Avoidance

The medical management of food allergies remains a challenging landscape. For decades, the standard approach has centered on allergen avoidance and emergency readiness. However, these strategies place a heavy burden on patients and families, often leading to reduced quality of life, social limitations

and persistent anxiety. In recent years, researchers and clinicians have turned their attention toward more proactive treatments aimed at desensitization and tolerance development, marking a significant shift in the field.

Avoidance as the Standard

The cornerstone of current food allergy management is strict avoidance of the offending allergen. This involves detailed label reading, cross-contact prevention and in many cases, limiting dining out or participating in social events where food is served. [1] For individuals with multiple food allergies, this approach can be especially overwhelming, requiring extensive meal planning and education for caregivers, schools and food service providers. Accidental exposures remain a constant threat, even in the most cautious environments, highlighting the limitations of avoidance as a long-term solution. The psychological burden, ranging from food anxiety to social isolation, is increasingly recognized as a critical component of patient care that needs to be addressed alongside physical health.[29]

Emergency Preparedness

Given the risk of accidental exposure, emergency preparedness is a non-negotiable aspect of allergy management. Epinephrine auto-injectors (eg, EpiPen) are the first-line treatment for anaphylaxis, a life-threatening allergic reaction.[30] Despite their importance, adherence is surprisingly low. In a 2013–2014 survey of more than 600 schools enrolled in a program supplying epinephrine for emergency use, over 10% reported at least one incident of anaphylaxis.[31] Fewer than 60% of at-risk individuals consistently carry epinephrine, and even among those who do, hesitation to use the device in emergencies is common.[32] Fear of needles, uncertainty about whether symptoms warrant use and lack of training, all contribute to delayed or improper administration. Educational initiatives are crucial to address these barriers. Programs targeting schools, restaurants and community organizations can improve awareness and confidence in using epinephrine, potentially saving lives. Legislative action requiring stock epinephrine in public places, such as schools and airplanes, is a step in the right direction but needs broader implementation.[7,33]

In 2024, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) approval of Neffy, the first needle-free epinephrine nasal spray for treating anaphylaxis, offered a significant advancement for individuals with severe food allergies.[34] This device delivers a dry powder epinephrine via a single spray into one nostril, providing a rapid and effective alternative to traditional injections. Neffy is particularly beneficial for children and adults who experience anxiety or fear related to needles, as it simplifies the administration process and may encourage more consistent use during allergic emergencies. Additionally, its compact and portable design makes it easier to carry, potentially increasing the likelihood of timely treatment in critical moments.[35,36]

In July 2025, the FDA accepted Aquestive Therapeutics' New Drug Application (NDA) for Anaphylm, a sublingual epinephrine film designed to treat anaphylaxis and other type 1 allergic reactions. Anaphylm is a small, fast-dissolving film (about the size of a postage stamp) that delivers epinephrine via a polymer matrix-based prodrug formulation when placed under the tongue.[37] The prodrug is engineered to be easily absorbed through tissue, and once it enters the bloodstream, it rapidly cleaves back into base epinephrine to exert its therapeutic effect. The Anaphylm packaging is thinner and more compact than a standard credit card, enabling it to be carried conveniently in a pocket, and is engineered to remain durable under environmental conditions such as rain and sunlight exposure.[38,39] Although the product has not yet received FDA approval, it is currently under regulatory review, with a target decision date expected in early 2026. If approved, Anaphylm would offer another novel and more convenient alternative to traditional epinephrine auto-injectors, potentially improving ease of use in emergency situations.

Innovations in Treatment: Moving Toward Food Allergy Tolerance

The growing recognition of avoidance limitations has catalyzed interest in treatments that go beyond symptom management to actively modifying the allergic response. The most well-established approach for suppressing food allergies is allergen-specific immunotherapy (AIT). This method involves gradually exposing patients to increasing doses of the allergen, aiming to desensitize the immune

system and reduce allergic reactions over time. Several innovative therapies are showing promise in clinical trials and early practice, with some already reaching regulatory approval.[40]

Oral Immunotherapy (OIT)

Oral immunotherapy involves the controlled, gradual introduction of small amounts of an allergen (cow's milk, hen's egg, or peanut) to the patient's diet, with the goal of increasing the threshold of reactivity. The 2020 FDA approval of Palforzia, an OIT product for peanut allergy, was a landmark moment, offering the first officially sanctioned therapeutic option beyond avoidance.[41] During OIT, patients consume gradually increasing amounts of the allergen, typically every two weeks under medical supervision, until a maintenance dose is achieved. The allergen is then ingested regularly, usually about three times per week. Reported desensitization rates vary considerably, with increased tolerance observed in approximately 30% to over 90% of trial participants.[42] While OIT does not offer a permanent cure, it can significantly reduce the risk of severe reactions caused by accidental ingestion. For many families, this means peace of mind and increased dietary flexibility. However, the therapy is not without risks, including gastrointestinal discomfort, allergic reactions during dosing and the need for strict adherence to protocols. It also requires close medical supervision, which can be a barrier in underserved areas.

Biologic Therapies

In contrast to OIT, which is directed at desensitization to specific food allergens, biologic therapies act on the fundamental immunologic pathways that mediate allergic responses.[43] Biologics, particularly human monoclonal antibodies such as omalizumab (Xolair), represent an innovative approach in allergy management. These medications work by binding to immunoglobulin E (IgE), the antibody responsible for initiating allergic reactions, thereby dampening the immune system's hypersensitive response.[44] In 2024, the FDA approved omalizumab as an adjunct therapy for certain food allergies, especially in patients undergoing OIT.[41] For those with multiple food allergies or high baseline sensitivity, biologics may help improve safety and tolerance thresholds,

allowing them to undergo other treatments more effectively.[45] However, biologics come with prohibitive costs and are typically reserved for patients with severe or complex cases.

Epicutaneous and Sublingual Immunotherapy

New delivery methods are under investigation to improve safety and accessibility. Epicutaneous immunotherapy (EPIT) involves placing a patch containing allergen proteins on the skin, allowing for gradual absorption and immune exposure through dermal layers.[46,47] Sublingual immunotherapy (SLIT) uses liquid drops or tablets placed under the tongue, providing direct access to immune cells in the oral mucosa. Both approaches show promise in reducing allergen sensitivity while minimizing systemic side effects commonly seen in OIT.[48,49] Although these therapies are still undergoing clinical evaluation, they could offer safer, more accessible alternatives for patients who are unable or unwilling to undergo OIT.

Nanoparticle-based Immunotherapy

Recent research in AIT has explored the use of engineered nanoparticles, including submicron polymeric, lipid-based and nano-emulsion-based designs. These nanoparticles can encapsulate food allergen molecules, enabling them to navigate the immune system "stealthily" and reduce the risk of triggering adverse allergic reactions.[50] Compared to traditional AIT delivery methods, such as oral, sublingual, subcutaneous and epicutaneous routes, nanoparticles offer several advantages. They can protect allergens from degradation by acting as masked allergen transports, reduce the likelihood of anaphylactic responses and facilitate targeted delivery to specific immune cells, potentially enhancing efficacy while minimizing adverse events.[51] A nanoparticle-encapsulated purified peanut protein extract administered by intravenous infusion is currently being studied in an ongoing phase Ib/Ia clinical trial to assess safety, tolerability and pharmacodynamics.

Use of Modified Allergens

Approaches that modify food allergen proteins to reduce their allergenicity while preserving

immunogenicity represent a long-standing goal in food allergy treatment. Peptide allergen immunotherapy (AIT) involves administering carefully selected peptides derived from key peanut protein components to induce immune tolerance. These peptides are designed to be too small to cross-link IgE antibodies on mast cells, thereby significantly reducing the risk of allergic reactions.[52] This strategy has the potential to markedly improve the safety profile of peanut immunotherapy.[53] A phase II clinical trial of this novel peptide-based AIT formulation is currently in progress.

Another promising strategy for developing hypoallergenic immunotherapies involves protein engineering and genetic modification of food allergens.[54] In the case of peanut allergy, efforts have focused on creating modified peanut protein variants that retain key structural and functional characteristics while altering allergenic epitopes to reduce the risk of IgE-mediated reactions.[55] This engineered protein approach remains in the initial stages of development and has not yet progressed to human clinical trials.

A virus-like particle (VLP)-based peanut vaccine is currently being evaluated in a phase I clinical trial as a potential treatment for peanut allergy. VLP vaccines are known for their high immunogenicity. The underlying mechanism of this approach is that incorporating peanut allergens into the VLP structure may harness the immunostimulatory properties of the viral platform to promote the production of protective, allergen-specific IgG antibodies (blocking antibodies) without eliciting an allergic response.[56-58]

Prevention Strategies: The Shift to Early Introduction

For many years, guidelines recommended delaying the introduction of allergenic foods, particularly for infants considered high risk due to family history or early eczema. However, this approach has been upended by recent landmark research demonstrating that early exposure may actually help prevent food allergies.

The LEAP Study: A Paradigm Shift

The 2015 LEAP (Learning Early About Peanut Allergy) trial marked a turning point in food allergy prevention. This randomized controlled study found

that introducing peanut-containing foods to high-risk infants between 4 and 11 months of age reduced the incidence of peanut allergy by more than 80% compared to avoidance.[59,60] The findings were so compelling that they led to a global overhaul of infant feeding guidelines. A recently published study found that introducing peanuts in infancy and continuing until age five led to lasting tolerance into adolescence, regardless of whether peanut consumption continued afterward. This demonstrates that long-term prevention and tolerance of food allergies can be achieved.[61]

Expanding to Other Allergens

Building on the LEAP findings, subsequent studies have investigated the early introduction of additional allergens such as egg, milk, sesame and tree nuts. The EAT (Enquiring About Tolerance) study and others have explored the safety, timing and frequency of early feeding, supporting the idea that there may be a “window of opportunity” in infancy during which the immune system is more likely to develop tolerance rather than sensitization. While some questions remain, such as optimal dosages and protocols, early introduction is increasingly viewed as a foundational tool for reducing food allergy prevalence in future generations.[62,63]

The Role of Policy and Advocacy

While medical research has driven major advances in the understanding and treatment of food allergies, policy and advocacy efforts are critical for translating these gains into everyday safety, access and inclusion. Effective change requires cooperation between governments, schools, industry leaders and communities to ensure those living with food allergies are protected, supported and empowered.

Natasha’s Law

One of the most poignant examples of policy driven by personal tragedy is Natasha’s Law, enacted in the UK in 2021. This legislation was introduced following the 2016 death of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, a teenager who suffered a fatal allergic reaction after consuming a pre-packaged sandwich that lacked allergen labeling. Her case exposed critical gaps in food labeling laws, especially for

“pre-packed for direct sale” items prepared on-site in retail outlets. Natasha’s Law now mandates full ingredients and allergen labeling on all such food products.[64] It represents a major step forward for consumer protection and a powerful example of how advocacy, especially from affected families, can lead to meaningful systemic change.

School and Public Access to Epinephrine

Another crucial policy area is ensuring widespread availability and accessibility of emergency medication, particularly epinephrine auto-injectors, in schools and public settings. While many countries have passed legislation requiring schools to stock epinephrine and train staff in its use, implementation is uneven, and compliance often depends on local resources and awareness levels. In some areas, access remains limited due to cost, liability concerns, or bureaucratic hurdle.[65] A more unified global effort is needed to mandate the presence of epinephrine in educational institutions, childcare centers and other public venues. International cooperation and standardized guidelines could dramatically improve outcomes in emergency allergy scenarios.[66]

Responsibility of the Food Industry

The food industry plays an essential role in protecting individuals with food allergies, yet many challenges remain. Clear, accurate and consistent allergen labeling is essential for consumers to make safe choices. However, voluntary or vague labels (such as “may contain traces”) are often overused or misapplied, leading to confusion, unnecessary restrictions and sometimes risky decisions by consumers.[7] Restaurants and food manufacturers must be held accountable for implementing rigorous allergen control measures, including staff training, cross-contamination protocols and honest communication. Transparency and consistency across the industry are key to building trust and reducing accidental exposures.[67,68]

Creating an Inclusive and Supportive Society

Food allergies impact every facet of a person’s life, from medical care to social interactions, work and family life. A truly effective approach to managing food allergies goes beyond clinical treatment and

policy; it requires a collective societal shift toward empathy, inclusion and understanding.

Education and Empathy

Education is one of the most effective tools for preventing allergic reactions and fostering inclusive environments. Training for school staff, food service workers, caregivers and even peers can help prevent potentially life-threatening exposures by equipping individuals with the knowledge to identify risks and respond appropriately. This education can also combat the stigma associated with food allergies, particularly in children who may otherwise face social isolation. Simple actions, such as asking about allergies before offering food or ensuring allergen-free options at public events can make a profound difference in a food-allergic person’s daily life. A study demonstrated that peanut residues can be effectively removed from adult hands using soap and running water or commercial wipes, but not through the use of antibacterial gels. Promoting empathy in communities is crucial to ensure those with allergies are not seen as a burden, but as individuals who require understanding and compassion. With proper awareness, society can shift from viewing allergies as inconveniences to recognizing them as important health conditions that deserve respect.[69,70]

Mental Health Support

The emotional and psychological toll of living with food allergies is often underestimated. Children with food allergies are more likely to suffer from anxiety, and parents often experience significant stress from constant vigilance required to manage their child’s condition. The risk of bullying, social exclusion and fear of accidental exposure can exacerbate these mental health challenges. Unfortunately, mental health support for food allergy sufferers is limited. Access to counseling, peer support groups and other psychological resources tailored to those with allergies can provide valuable emotional relief. Incorporating mental health care into food allergy management plans is essential to addressing the full scope of the condition. A comprehensive approach that includes mental health resources can help individuals with food allergies build resilience and cope with the social and emotional burden of their condition.[24,71]

Inclusive Policies

Lastly, institutional policies should reflect the diverse needs of people with food allergies. Workplaces, schools, airlines and other public entities must adopt formal protocols to ensure allergen-safe environments. This includes providing allergy-friendly food options, establishing designated safe zones, training staff to recognize and respond to allergy-related emergencies and implementing emergency response plans. By making accommodations for food allergies as seriously as other health-related needs, these organizations can help reduce the risk of allergic reactions and foster a more inclusive society. Such policies not only improve safety but also affirm the importance of respecting and supporting individuals with food allergies. [68,72]

CONCLUSION

Food allergies have evolved from a niche medical concern to a global public health challenge, particularly in children. As their prevalence continues to rise, current management strategies focused primarily on avoidance and emergency preparedness are no longer enough. While these approaches are essential for immediate safety, they fail to address the underlying causes of food allergies or improve the long-term quality of life for those affected.

Fortunately, progress is being made. Advances in treatment such as OIT and biologic therapies like omalizumab signal a shift toward active desensitization and long-term allergy risk reduction. At the same time, studies such as LEAP have revolutionized food allergy prevention, showing that early allergen introduction can significantly reduce the risk of developing allergies. These new findings are reshaping both clinical practices and public health guidelines, offering hope for a future with fewer food allergies.

However, challenges persist, including unequal access to care, insufficient psychological support and widespread social exclusion. These issues underscore the need for a more integrated approach, one that incorporates not just medical advances but also societal change. From enhancing food industry regulations to creating inclusive environments through education and empathy, every sector has a role to play in tackling this issue.

The food allergy epidemic requires a coordinated, multifaceted response that involves clinicians, researchers, policymakers, businesses and communities. A collective effort can move us away from a culture of fear and exclusion to one that prioritizes prevention, inclusion and empowerment for those living with food allergies. By working together, we can create a future where food allergies are better understood, more effectively managed and less stigmatized, offering individuals the support they need to live fuller, safer lives.

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