



# Asthma and food

Most people with asthma do not need to avoid any foods unless they have a confirmed allergy or sensitivity.

Food is rarely a trigger for asthma. However, in a small number of people, a food allergy or sensitivity to certain food chemicals may cause asthma symptoms or severe flare-ups.

Food allergy affects around 10% of infants, 4-8% of children, and about 2% of adults in Australia and New Zealand.

## What is a food allergy?

A food allergy occurs when the immune system reacts strongly to a food that is usually harmless. The body treats the food as a threat and releases chemicals that cause allergy symptoms.

Symptoms can include:

- Hives or skin rashes
- Vomiting or diarrhoea
- Tightening or swelling of the airways
- Swelling of the lips, tongue or throat

Reactions can happen very quickly, sometimes within minutes of eating the food. In some cases, symptoms can be severe and may require urgent medical treatment or hospital care.

## Foods that may trigger an allergic reaction

Common food allergens include:

- Peanuts
- Seafood
- Eggs
- Wheat
- Soy
- Dairy products

True food allergy is more common in young children and is often linked to other allergic conditions, such as eczema. Many children outgrow food allergies by around five years of age.

## What is food chemical intolerance?

Foods naturally contain thousands of chemicals. Some people are sensitive to certain food chemicals, which may trigger asthma symptoms.



Food chemical intolerance is more common than food allergy, but symptoms are usually less severe.

Reactions:

- Are often delayed, sometimes up to three days after eating.
- Are dose dependent, meaning symptoms are more likely or more severe if larger amounts are eaten.
- People of all ages can be affected, and sensitivity may increase over time.

### Food chemicals that may trigger asthma

Food chemicals that may affect asthma in some people include:

- Sulphites
- Food colours (such as tartrazine)
- Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Salicylates

#### Sulphites

Sulphites are the most common food chemicals linked to asthma symptoms. They are used to preserve foods and prevent fermentation. Sulphites may be found in:

- Processed foods
- Some fresh foods, such as prawns and grapes
- Alcoholic drinks

On food labels, sulphites are listed as numbers 220–228.

#### Tartrazine

Tartrazine is an artificial yellow food colouring. It rarely triggers asthma, but if it does, avoiding artificial food colourings may be recommended. Tartrazine is listed on food labels as number 102. Other food colouring agents are listed on food labels as numbers 107, 110, 122–129, 132, 142, 151 and 155.

#### Dairy products

People with asthma are sometimes advised to avoid dairy products, particularly milk. Current research does not support this advice for most people.

Unless you have a diagnosed milk allergy or intolerance, dairy products do not need to be avoided. If you are concerned, seek advice from your doctor or a dietitian.

#### Monosodium glutamate (MSG)

MSG is a flavour enhancer found naturally in some foods and added to others. It is found in products such as:

- Vegemite and soy sauce
- Savoury snack foods
- Some takeaway meals

MSG is listed on food labels as numbers 620–625. Hydrolysed vegetable protein may have similar effects in people sensitive to MSG.

In some individuals, MSG has been linked to asthma symptoms occurring 6–12 hours after eating, rather than immediately.

#### Salicylates

Some people with asthma may be sensitive to salicylates, which are found in aspirin and certain foods. This only affects people who already have asthma and salicylate sensitivity. You will not develop asthma from eating foods containing salicylates.

A small number of people who react to aspirin may also react to salicylates in food. If you are sensitive, certain fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, condiments, nuts and drinks may trigger symptoms.

See the list of foods containing salicylates on the next page.

Testing for salicylate sensitivity can be difficult. In some cases, a supervised challenge test may be available through a doctor or specialist, who can also help you develop a plan to manage triggers.

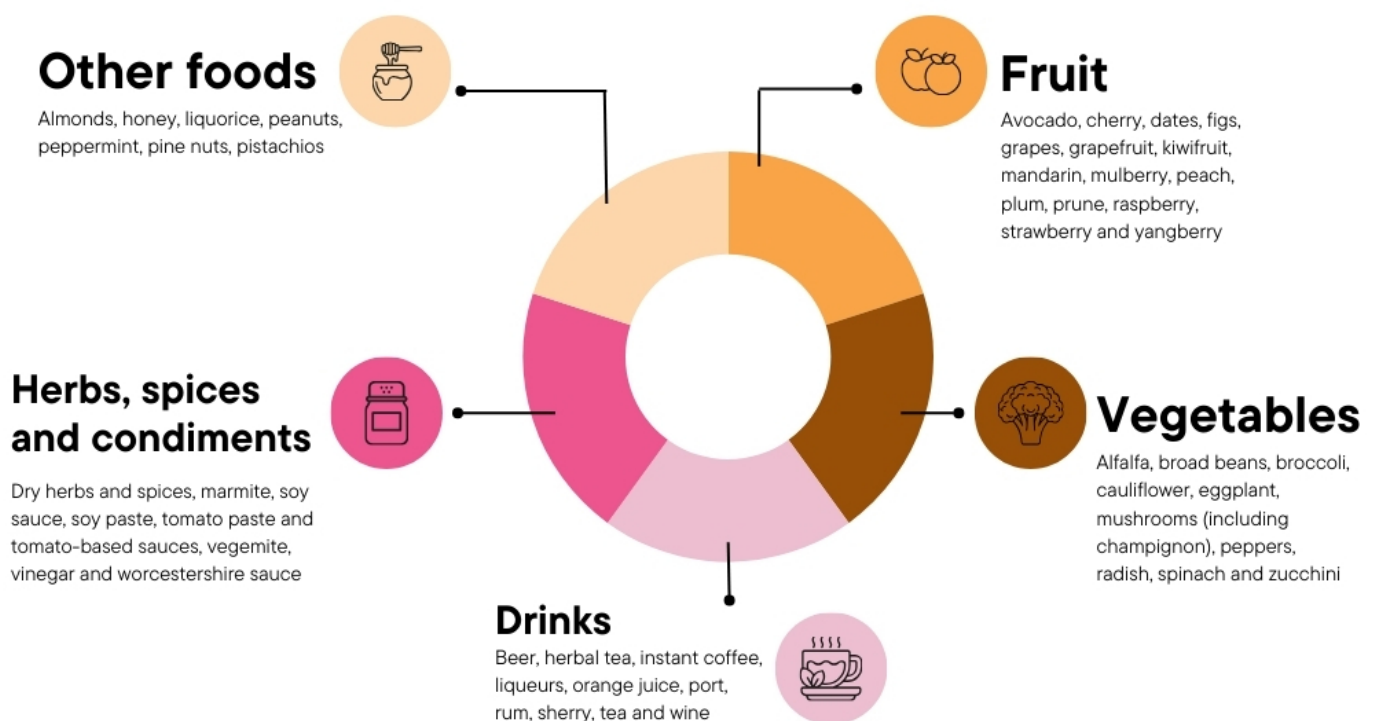


## What can I do to avoid problems?

- Avoid foods or food chemicals that you know trigger symptoms for you.
- Do not restrict foods unless advised by your doctor or dietitian.
- Read food labels carefully to identify additives such as sulphites, food colours and MSG if these trigger your symptoms.
- Have a written Asthma Action Plan and follow it closely.
- Take worsening symptoms seriously. In the event of an emergency, follow your Asthma Action Plan or call an ambulance (000).

## Foods containing salicylates

Below are foods containing salicylates. Most people with asthma do not need to avoid these foods unless they have confirmed salicylate sensitivity.





## Food, inflammation and asthma

Research led by Professor Lisa Wood, Chair of Asthma Australia's Research Advisory Committee, shows that diet can affect inflammation in the airways, particularly for people with lung conditions.

Studies found that people who eat enough fruits and vegetables each day are less likely to have asthma flare ups. These foods are rich in fibre and antioxidants, which help reduce airway inflammation.

Similar research in children shows that better diet quality reduced the severity of asthma symptoms. Eating a wide variety of fruits and vegetables also supports overall health and wellbeing.

Professor Wood's research also shows shown that diets high in fatty foods can increase airway inflammation and may reduce how well some asthma medicines work, including relievers.

### Eating well to breathe easier

Aim for a balanced diet with 5 servings of vegetables and 2 servings of fruit each day. Including fish regularly may also help. Research from James Cook University found that omega-3 (n-3) fats from fish and seafood (not supplements) were linked to a lower risk of asthma-like symptoms.

Eating a wide variety of healthy foods, alongside taking your medicines as prescribed and following your Asthma Action Plan, can help you manage asthma and support long-term lung health.

### Sources:

1. Asthma Australia. *How Food and Diet May Play a Role in Asthma Management*. 2025.
2. National Asthma Council of Australia. *Healthy Eating for Asthma*. 2025.
3. ScienceDaily. *Eating Fish May Help Prevent Asthma*. 2019.
4. Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy (ASCIA). *Food Allergy FAQ*. 2024.

## How we can help

Respiratory Care WA has a team of respiratory healthcare professionals here to provide information and support for Western Australians living with asthma and COPD. We offer in-person education and support at our respiratory hubs or via telehealth. Our team can also visit schools, workplaces or community groups to deliver free asthma management sessions. Email [ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au](mailto:ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au) to find out more.