

# ORAL ALLERGY SYNDROME (Pollen Food Syndrome)

## WHAT IS ORAL ALLERGY SYNDROME?

Otherwise known as Pollen Food Syndrome [PFS]. It is a hypersensitive reaction to raw fruits, nuts, and vegetables (plant-based foods). It usually causes mild irritation of the mouth, tongue, lips, and throat when the foods are eaten in their raw form. Some people are affected by only one or two foods and others can react to a wide range of foods. The most common foods involved are apples, peaches, kiwi, hazelnuts, and almonds, but just about any fruit, vegetable or nut can cause a reaction. PFS often affects people who suffer from spring or summertime hay fever commonly caused by grass, weed or tree pollens. The most common pollen involved in pollen food syndrome is **BIRCH TREE POLLEN**. PFS is a common condition affecting about 2% of the adult population of the UK.

## SYMPTOMS

- Mild symptoms can include itching and swelling of the lips, tongue, inside of the mouth, ears and throat, usually within 5-10 minutes of eating the allergenic food. These usually settle within an hour.
- Food preparation such as peeling or scraping of fruit and vegetables can cause skin irritation, sneezing and itchy eyes due to the release of food particles into the air.
- Occasionally, symptoms can include nausea, vomiting and very rarely severe breathing difficulties. It is worth noting that there are other types of plant allergy which may cause more severe symptoms such as lipid transfer and nut allergies.

## FOODS TO AVOID

- If you are allergic to grass pollen, you should avoid oranges, tomatoes, melons, Swiss chard and figs. Peanuts can also be a trigger food.
- If you have an allergy to weed pollens, then try to avoid bananas, courgettes, cucumber, melons, kiwi, and artichokes. Herbal infusions such as echinacea, chamomile and hibiscus can also be a trigger.
- Cross-reaction occurring between natural rubber latex and certain fruits (avocado, chestnuts, banana, mango, melon, papaya, and tomato) may also cause symptoms in some individuals. This is because the protein structure of latex is very similar to the fruit pollen structure.

## FACTORS which increase the risk of a reaction

- Consuming large amounts of the allergen in a short space of time such as nuts, soya milk, freshly squeezed juice and smoothies.
- Having allergies to lots of different plant-based foods.
- Having uncontrolled or reactive asthma.
- After eating the plant-based food and exercising or taking certain medication.

## DEVELOPING PFS

- If you are susceptible to allergies, you can become sensitised to airborne pollens by breathing them in. This is most commonly associated with the classic symptoms of hay fever which include a runny, itchy nose and itchy eyes.
- With PFS many plant-based foods, fruit, vegetables and cereals, have a protein structure that is very similar to the pollens in trees, grasses, and weeds (this is called cross-reactivity)
- The immune system doesn't always recognise the difference between the pollens in the trees, grasses, or weeds that you breathe in and the pollen structure in the plant-based foods that you eat.
- With PFS, the immune system recognises the food protein that you eat as an allergen and creates an allergic response.

## HONEY- A myth for allergies?

- Food allergy due to honey is very rare. In a study performed on 4,331 students none of them had a honey allergy.
- The pollen collected by bees is different from the pollen that triggers most seasonal allergies. Bees don't pollinate grass and trees, and the pollen in honey is the heavy, flower-based pollen that doesn't cause hay fever.
- There is no scientific evidence that eating honey builds immunity to allergies.
- However, some people who have a severe allergy to pollen can experience a serious anaphylactic reaction after eating honey.
- Avoid giving honey to babies under the age of 1 year. It can cause "infant botulism" producing a dangerous toxin in the baby's intestines.