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SHELLFISH & FISH ALLERGY

Introduction:

Allergies to shellfish or fish are quite common, usually the person knows what caused the problem, but the reaction may be severe and sufferers should have an emergency plan. This includes an Epinephrine auto-injector (like EpiPen) for severe reactions.

Fish and shellfish are quite different. People who are shellfish-allergic may be able to eat fish, and vice versa. But be aware that there is a risk of cross-contamination in restaurants, markets and open fish counters.

It is rare for a fish allergic patient to be allergic to all fish species; however as different types of fish often share common proteins, and as contamination is common someone who reacts to one type of fish may be advised to avoid all fish. This also applies to shellfish.

Different Types of Shellfish

Biologically speaking, shellfish are aquatic invertebrates rather than fish. They can be divided into four main groups:

Crustaceans (e.g. crab, lobster, crayfish, shrimp, prawn)

Molluscs:

(a) **Bivalves** (e.g. mussels, oysters, scallops, clams)

(b) **Gastropods** (e.g. limpets, periwinkles, snails)

(c) **Cephalopods** (e.g. squid, cuttlefish, octopus)

People who have reacted to one type of shellfish (e.g. crab) are likely to react to other members of the same group (in this case, other crustaceans). If you react to crab, avoid that and the rest of the crustacean group. If you react to squid, avoid that and the rest of the cephalopod group.

Shellfish from the other groups may not necessarily present a problem.

Allergy tests may help to predict which types of shellfish you will react to, but if in doubt it may be best to avoid all shellfish. .

Eating Out

In restaurants, inform staff if you have shellfish or fish allergy. Find out what your food is fried in, and whether the oil has been used for anything else. Check the ingredients of all stocks and soups as fish and shellfish may form the basis for these. If your allergy is very severe, ideally, your companions should avoid eating fish/shellfish in your presence, as there is a small risk that breathing in the cooked food may cause a reaction.

People have also been known to go into anaphylactic shock after breathing in airborne particles of shellfish or fish allergen in open fish markets.

Pre-packaged Foods

A full list of ingredients must be given for fish and crustaceans however small the amount. Producers do not have to state that products may have been contaminated during processing or that they contain mollusks. You should always check the label for the type of shellfish/fish to which you are allergic. Be extra careful when choosing stocks, soups and highly processed foods, which may contain shellfish or fish extract to add flavour.

Other reactions after eating fish but not actually allergy to fish/shellfish:

The Cod Worm:

Some people who think they are reacting to seafood are actually having an allergic reaction to a worm-like parasite called Anisakis (also known as the cod worm).

This parasite, relatively common in Spain, can cause hives, gastrointestinal upset or even anaphylaxis when present in fresh cephalopods, hake, anchovy or cod. If you react to a particular fish on one occasion, but later eat it with no problem, you should consider the possibility that the cod worm was responsible.

Excessive Histamine ingestion: sometimes present in spoiled fish (especially dark flesh fish, e.g.: tuna and mackerel), can cause a condition similar to allergy called scombroid poisoning. Histamine is not destroyed by cooking and the fish would taste normal, but soon after eating it, the sufferer would develop flushing, wheeze, abdominal cramps and/or diarrhea. Unlike an allergy, this would affect anyone who ate the offending food.

Toxic algae poison: Shellfish/fish sometimes absorb poison from toxic algae, which appear in the sea at certain times of year. This can cause syndromes known as amnesic, diarrhetic, paralytic and neurotoxic shellfish poisoning. People with these syndromes react to the toxin, but are not allergic and can still eat shellfish safely afterwards.

You can find this hand out among other allergy info on my website: www.doctorahmed.ca