

Pine nuts

Pine nuts are the edible seeds collected from pine trees cultivated in Europe, the USA and Asia. They are used as ingredients in some mainstream pre-packed food products such as pesto sauce, and also in products sold in health food shops.

Although allergy to pine nuts is uncommon, there are numerous reports in the medical literature showing that reactions do occur and that these can be severe. It is common for people with pine nut allergy to have no other food allergies.

If you are allergic to pine nuts, or think you may be allergic, this article will provide you with valuable information.

Any adverse symptoms to pine nuts should be reported to your GP. If an allergy is suspected, it is likely that you will be referred to an allergy clinic.

What is a food allergy?

Food allergy occurs when a person's immune system reacts inappropriately to a food. The first stage of the process is called sensitisation – when the immune system's "memory" registers the food as a threat. Antibodies to that food are produced, and at a subsequent encounter, these antibodies may connect with the food's proteins and trigger the release of certain substances in the body, such as histamine. This results in an allergic reaction.

Symptoms of a food allergy

The symptoms of a food allergy can come on rapidly. These may include nettle rash (also known as hives or urticaria) anywhere on the body, or a tingling or itchy feeling in the mouth.

More serious symptoms of a food allergy may include:

- Swelling in the throat and/or mouth
- Difficulty breathing
- Wheeze or asthma
- Severe abdominal (stomach) pain and recurrent vomiting

The term for this more serious form of allergy is anaphylaxis. In extreme cases there could be a dramatic fall in blood pressure (anaphylactic shock). The person may become weak and floppy and may have a sense of something terrible happening. This may lead to collapse and unconsciousness. On rare occasions, death from a food allergy can occur.

Read our factsheet about anaphylaxis and its treatment. This will help you understand what to do in an emergency.

<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/fact-sheet/anaphylaxis-the-facts/>

How can I get a diagnosis?

If you suspect you have a pine nut allergy you need to go to your GP and seek a referral to an NHS allergy clinic for a thorough assessment. To make a diagnosis, the allergy clinic staff are likely to perform allergy tests and will discuss your medical history with you.

If you are allergic to pine nuts should you avoid other nuts?

Pine nuts are in a different botanical category to tree nuts (such as walnuts, Brazils and cashews) and researchers point out that the overwhelming majority of people with pine nut allergy can tolerate these other nuts, and vice versa. So if you are allergic to pine nuts, it is highly unlikely that you need to avoid other nuts but discuss this with your allergy specialist if you have any concerns. Your allergy specialist will be able to give you specific advice regarding which foods you should avoid.

Where are pine nuts used?

Pine nuts are often found in pesto sauce. You could also find them in sandwiches, cakes, bread, salads, pizzas, biscuits, confectionery and ice cream.

Pine nuts are sold in health food stores as well as in supermarkets. In countries where they are harvested commercially – such as Spain, Italy and Morocco – their use is particularly common. They are also widely used in the USA.

Pine nuts may turn up where you don't expect to find them. We have seen them as ingredients in pre-packed products such as a lentil and mint lamb leg joint; in a butternut squash rolled pork loin; in vegan chocolate tortes; and in a Christmas pudding. Remember that pine nuts may be found in packets of mixed seeds.

If you are allergic to pine nuts, we strongly advise you to read food labels scrupulously and question catering staff very directly. Be explicit when informing people what you must avoid – telling staff you are allergic to pine nuts and pine kernels. Remember that the phrase “nut free” may not necessarily signify the absence of pine nuts because they are in a different botanical category to tree nuts.

Under the food information regulations, any of 14 allergens must be highlighted in the ingredient list when they appear in pre-packed food. However, pine nuts are not among those 14 and you will not see them highlighted.

The use of pine nut oil is rare. It is golden coloured and can be used for making salad dressings and drizzling on to dried or grilled meats.

Other names

The pine nut is known by a variety of other names including pine kernels, pinon, Indian nut, pignoli and pignolia.

‘Pine mouth’ syndrome

People have reported experiencing a metallic or bitter taste within 48 hours of eating pine nuts. This can last for up to two weeks. Doctors are uncertain what causes pine mouth syndrome, but do not believe it is harmful to health. It is not thought to be an allergic reaction.

Feedback

Please help us to improve our information resources by sending us your feedback at: -

<https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/information-resources-feedback/>

Sources

All the information we produce is evidence based or follows expert opinion and is checked by our clinical and research reviewers. If you wish to know the sources we used in producing any of our information products or you would like a version of this article with the references included, please contact info@anaphylaxis.org.uk and we will gladly supply details.

Reviewer

This article has been reviewed by Dr Gary Stiefel, Consultant in Paediatric Allergy, University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust.

Disclosure

Dr Stiefel is a trustee for Allergy UK, a Principle investigator for a study funded by Aimmune on peanut immunotherapy and has provided some advice for Aimmune.

Disclaimer

The information provided in this article is given in good faith. Every effort is taken to ensure accuracy. All patients are different, and specific cases need specific advice. There is no substitute for good medical advice provided by a medical professional.

About Anaphylaxis UK

Anaphylaxis UK is the only UK-wide charity solely focused on supporting people at risk of serious, life-threatening allergic reactions. We provide information and support to people living with allergies through our free national helpline and local support groups. We also campaign and fundraise to achieve our ultimate aim, to create a safer environment for all people at risk of serious allergies. Visit our website www.anaphylaxis.org.uk and follow us to keep up-to-date with our latest news. We're on Facebook @anaphylaxixUK, LinkedIn, Instagram @anaphylaxisUK, Twitter @AnaphylaxisUK and YouTube.