

Oral Allergy Syndrome



If you suffer from hay fever (allergic rhinitis) caused by pollen, your mouth or throat may become itchy after eating an apple or celery. This happens in up to 50 to 75% of adults allergic to birch tree pollen. This reaction occurs because the proteins found in some fruits and vegetables are very similar to those found in pollen. These proteins can confuse the immune system and cause an allergic reaction or make existing symptoms worse, which is referred to as cross-reactivity. In the case of pollen and foods, the result of cross-reactivity is called Oral Allergy Syndrome (OAS) also known as Pollen Food Allergy Syndrome (PFAS).

WHAT IS ORAL ALLERGY SYNDROME?

OAS is a form of a contact allergic reaction that occurs upon contact of the mouth and throat with raw fruits or vegetables. The most frequent symptoms of OAS include itchiness or swelling of the mouth, face, lip, tongue and throat. Symptoms usually appear immediately after eating raw fruits or vegetables, although in rare cases, the reaction can occur more than an hour later. OAS is generally considered to be a mild form of food allergy. Rarely, OAS can cause severe throat swelling leading to difficulty swallowing or breathing. In a person who is highly allergic, a systemic reaction, called anaphylaxis (an-a-fi-LAK-sis), may be caused by a pollen cross-reactive raw fruit or vegetable, but this is very uncommon. OAS can occur at any time of the year.

Although there is no definitive test for OAS, affected individuals often have a positive allergy skin test or blood test for specific pollen, along with a history of symptoms after ingestion of the suspected foods. Many patients with oral allergy syndrome can eat the same foods when they are cooked, baked or highly processed without symptoms. Heat appears to break down proteins in the foods so that they are not recognized by the immune system and don't cause symptoms.

MANAGING YOUR SYMPTOMS

Symptoms are generally mild and resolve after a few minutes, but the symptoms can become serious. Approximately 1-2% of people with oral allergy syndrome can develop anaphylaxis, a severe life-threatening allergy. Oral allergy syndrome symptoms are generally more severe when the patient's pollen allergy is active.

It is recommended that the patient avoids the fresh fruits or vegetables that cause symptoms. If the foods are tolerated when they are cooked, then it is okay to continue eating the cooked forms. Some studies have shown allergy shots to the pollen may help reduce the oral allergy syndrome symptoms to the food.