

## FOOD ALLERGENS

# Shellfish Allergy

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### What is a shellfish allergy?

A shellfish allergy is an abnormal immune system response to the proteins in shellfish. The food parts that trigger a reaction are called allergens. In a person with an allergy, their immune system mistakes the allergen as a threat to the body. The body tries to defend itself against the protein, resulting in symptoms that range from mild to severe, even life-threatening. If a person has an allergy to shellfish, the only way to prevent symptoms of a reaction is to avoid contact with shellfish.

### Identifying the allergen

Shellfish are a type of marine animal with a shell-like exterior. There are two main categories of shellfish: crustaceans and mollusks. Crustaceans include shrimp, crayfish, crab, and lobster. Mollusks include clams, scallops, oysters, and mussels. Shellfish is among the most common food allergens, with the crustacean group causing more allergic reactions than the mollusk group. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recognizes crustacean shellfish as one of the nine major allergy-causing foods. This recognition requires food manufacturers to highlight the allergen ingredients on packaged food labels.

The foods listed below have the potential to cause an allergic reaction. Read the ingredients list on packaged food products to identify potential allergens. The specific variety of crustacean, like shrimp, crab, or lobster, will be highlighted in the



ingredients list or in a separate “contains” statement near the ingredients list. However, manufacturers do not have to specifically identify the variety of mollusks. For example, a product might contain clams, but the ingredients would just list mollusks.

#### Crustacean shellfish

- Barnacle
- Crab
- Crawfish
- Krill
- Lobster
- Prawns
- Shrimp

#### Mollusk shellfish

- Abalone
- Clams
- Cuttlefish
- Mussels
- Octopus
- Periwinkle
- Scallops
- Snails
- Squid

*\*Lists adapted from <https://www.foodallergy.org/living-food-allergies/food-allergy-essentials/common-allergens/shellfish>*

While most packaged products do not contain shellfish, they may be in fish stock or fish sauce, seafood flavoring, and surimi. Glucosamine supplements may also contain shellfish.

Many people with shellfish allergies are not allergic to finned fish. While both are marine animals, biologically they are very different species. Fish, like salmon and tuna, contain many of the same beneficial nutrients as shellfish. Special care is needed to avoid cross-contact between shellfish and fish. A registered dietitian (RD) can help identify fish varieties that safely fit into a balanced and nutritious diet.

## Managing a shellfish allergy

The best way to manage a food allergy is to avoid the allergen, in this case shellfish.

Symptoms can differ from person to person. Reactions can occur immediately after eating or drinking an allergen or hours later. A previously mild reaction can be severe the next time.

### Symptoms of an allergy can include:

- Skin conditions, like hives,
- Abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea,
- Itching or swelling of the mouth, throat, eyes,
- Shortness of breath, or even
- Anaphylaxis, which happens when your immune system releases a flood of chemicals that cause you to go into shock. Symptoms of anaphylaxis can include the previously mentioned conditions plus tightness in the throat, coughing, choking, or wheezing, or a severe drop in blood pressure. Anaphylaxis can be life-threatening, so it is critical to treat it immediately if it occurs.

Minor symptoms may improve with the use of an antihistamine, but this does not make it safe to eat the food. Severe reactions, such as anaphylaxis, require medical treatment. Your health-care provider might prescribe medication for emergency treatment of your allergy. It is important to understand how and when to use the medication. Reach out to your health-care provider with any questions.

Food allergies are different from person to person and symptoms may vary. The severity of a reaction can change over time. The only way to prevent a reaction is to avoid the allergen. Working with a health-care provider, specifically a registered dietitian, can help identify safe foods to maintain a varied and nutritious diet.

## References

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