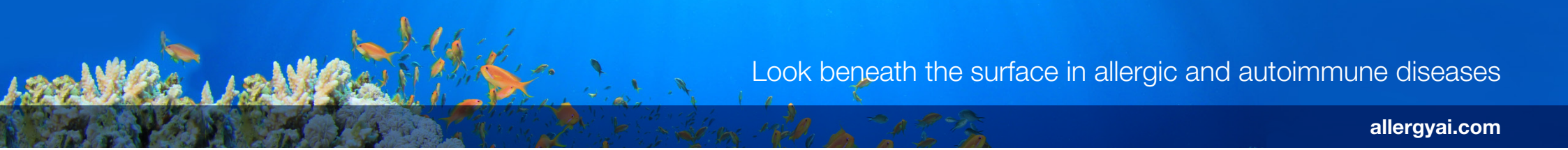

Living with allergy – fish / shellfish

Allergies to fish and shellfish are quite common and different to one another – people who are allergic to shellfish may be able to eat fish and vice versa. However, there is a risk of cross contamination in restaurants, markets and on fish counters.

For people who are allergic to fish, it is unusual to be allergic to all types of fish. This is also the case with shellfish, however, the risk of cross contamination should be taken into account.

Types of shellfish

Biologically, shellfish are different to fish and can be divided into four groups.
Crustaceans: (includes crab, lobster, crayfish, shrimp and prawn)
Molluscs, bivalves: (includes mussels, oysters, scallops and clams)
Molluscs, gastropods: (includes limpets, periwinkles and snails)
Molluscs, cephalopods: (includes squid, cuttlefish and octopus)

People who react to a shellfish in one of these groups are likely to react to others in the same group. So, for example, if you are allergic to squid, then you should avoid cuttlefish and octopus. Testing may be able to give you the exact answer but if in doubt it may be best to avoid all shellfish.

Eating out and shopping

Start by letting the restaurant staff know that you are allergic to fish or shellfish. Ask what the food has between fried in and whether the oil has been used for anything else. You may also need to ask about the ingredients in the *stocks* and *soups* as fish and shellfish may be used as ingredients.

If your allergy is very severe, ideally your companions should avoid eating fish or shellfish as there is a small risk of a reaction from breathing in the cooked food.

Oriental foods often contain many different kinds of fish in one dish and the chopped pieces may be difficult to spot.

Surimi, a processed seafood is usually made from whitefish but may contain shellfish extract, can be present in processed foods, for example, *pizza toppings*.

Anchovies are normally found in *Caesar salad* and Caesar *salad dressing*. They may also be found in *Worcestershire sauce, Patum Peperium (Gentlemen's relish)* and *Caponata* a Sicilian relish.

Fish sauce can include shellfish, especially in eastern dishes. Watch out for the terms: *nuoc*, *mam* and *nam pia*.

Check the ingredients lists on all food, especially *oriental sauces, pastes, stock, soups* and *prepared meals*. While labels should feature a full list of ingredients for fish and shellfish, they do not need to state that the food may have been contaminated or that they contain molluscs. If in doubt ask the catering or shop staff.

Iodine

Sometimes, people with a shellfish allergy are told to avoid iodine, an element present in shellfish, seaweed and cleaning products. While it is possible to be allergic to iodine, this allergy is unrelated to the shellfish allergy which is caused by a muscle in the shellfish.

Supplements and toiletries

Although the allergen is the flesh, because of contamination, it can be a good idea to also avoid the fish or shellfish.

Glucosamine, used in treating arthritis, is derived from the skeletons of shellfish and is unsuitable for people with a shellfish allergy. An alternative to glucosamine is chondroitin, a shellfish-free alternative.

Chitin, used in fat absorbers, is a product made from shellfish shells and should also be avoided. Watch out too for some *moisturisers* which may contain chitin.

While some *calcium supplements* contain oyster shells, it is uncertain whether this poses a risk of allergy although it is likely to be small.

It's not always allergy

Sometimes a reaction can be caused when the fish contains histamine which can be present in spoiled fish, especially dark-fleshed fish such as tuna and mackerel. The histamine is not destroyed by cooking and the fish would taste normal. Soon after eating the fish the affected person develops flushing, wheeze, abdominal cramps and/or diarrhoea. It is called scombroid poisoning and unlike allergy will affect anybody who eats the fish.

Shellfish and fish can also absorb poison from toxic algae at certain times of year. This can give rise to a number of syndromes: amnesic, diarrhetic, paralytic and neurotoxic shellfish poisoning. People affected by this can still eat shellfish when the toxin is not present.

A parasite known as the cod worm, relatively common in Spain, can cause urticaria, gastric upset or even anaphylaxis when present in fresh cephalopods, cod, hake or anchovy. These symptoms can easily be mistaken for allergy and should be considered if you have a problem after eating fish on one occasion but not subsequently.

Further information on allergy is available from www.allergyai.com

These lists are guides – always check the individual labels.

If it's not labeled, it is safer to avoid the food.

Adapted from the patient literature of King's College Hospital, London.

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