



THE INSTITUTE FOR
FUNCTIONAL
MEDICINE®

VERSION 13

Elimination *Diet*



Comprehensive Guide

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Overview of the Elimination Diet



An elimination diet is a short-term eating plan in which you avoid foods that could trigger adverse reactions, such as headaches or digestive issues. Eliminating the foods for a few weeks allows inflammation and other symptoms to quiet down. Then, you can try reintroducing each food you eliminated to help identify which foods trigger symptoms.

Many types of elimination diets exist. This guide explains IFM's Elimination Diet, which helps you avoid an extensive list of common trigger foods. Your functional medicine provider may suggest this plan when they suspect adverse food reactions are playing a role in digestive dysfunction. The Elimination Diet may also be recommended when you have other health concerns that are sometimes linked to food sensitivities and intolerances, such as fatigue, joint pain, or skin conditions. If your health concerns haven't responded to typical treatments, you and your provider should consider whether food triggers are playing a role.

Healing the gut and being able to eat a variety of whole foods are the ultimate goals of the Elimination Diet. A food plan that includes a wide selection of nutritious foods helps you get all essential nutrients. This is especially important for anyone interested in supporting their overall health.

Linking Food Reactions and Health Symptoms

Some people deal with troublesome symptoms for a long time before realizing food could be triggering them. This is particularly true when food reactions are delayed by hours or a few days from when you ate the food. Delayed reactions are typical in cases of food sensitivities and intolerances. This contrasts with food allergies, which tend to cause symptoms immediately after a trigger food is eaten.¹

Frequently, foods that provoke adverse reactions are ones regularly eaten—often several times a day—like wheat, milk, and eggs.²⁻⁴ When foods are routinely eaten, it becomes more challenging for you to identify that they're triggering symptoms. If you keep eating foods to which you react, your digestion and absorption of nutrients may be impaired.⁵

Some foods, including corn and soy, are not only eaten often but are commonly genetically modified (GMO) and contaminated with toxic weed killers.⁶⁻⁸ The Elimination Diet gives you an opportunity to see how you feel when such foods are omitted from your eating plan.

Symptoms of adverse food reactions cover a range of categories and vary from person to person.⁹ Moreover, the same trigger food might cause a headache in one person but diarrhea in another person.

Some conditions in which adverse food reactions might play a role include:

- Asthma^{10,11}
- Autoimmune disorders (such as certain thyroid issues)^{12,13}
- Bladder pain syndrome (interstitial cystitis)¹⁴
- Chronic sinus drainage¹⁵

Overview of the Elimination Diet

- Digestive issues: belly pain, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, gas, heartburn, “leaky gut” (increased intestinal permeability), nausea, etc.^{2,16-18}
- Eosinophilic esophagitis (EoE), an inflammatory disorder that can interfere with swallowing¹⁹⁻²¹
- Fatigue (low energy)²
- Headaches and migraines³
- Joint pain and muscle aches²²
- Mood changes, including depression²³
- Skin irritations^{24,25}

What to Expect on IFM’s Elimination Diet

IFM’s Elimination Diet consists of two main parts: elimination and reintroduction. The elimination phase generally lasts a minimum of three weeks.²⁶ However, your functional medicine provider may adjust this based on factors specific to you. Some individuals need longer elimination periods.²⁷ Your body needs time to clear its reactivity to foods that are triggering symptoms.

When you start the Elimination Diet, your symptoms may worsen for a few days due to withdrawal from commonly eaten foods. The intensity and type of withdrawal symptoms vary from person to person. Examples of withdrawal symptoms include stool changes, nausea, muscle aches, fatigue, mood changes, and a general feeling of unwellness.^{28,29}

After the elimination period, the next step is a personalized food reintroduction. Reintroduction involves adding back one food at a time to observe whether that food causes symptoms. Before reintroduction, you should be free of significant symptoms so that you can identify whether a reintroduced food triggers an unwanted reaction. Your functional medicine provider will guide you as to when to start reintroduction.

If a reintroduced food causes symptoms (physical, mental, or emotional), you’ll generally be advised to avoid it for an additional three to six months. After that time, you can try reintroducing the food again. Once your body has healed, you may discover that you can now eat some foods that initially caused symptoms. However, you may find you need to avoid a few foods long term.

Features of the Elimination Diet

Identifies food triggers: The Elimination Diet can be helpful for identifying food triggers, particularly food sensitivities and intolerances. Food **sensitivity** reactions may be delayed by hours or even days.³⁰ Food sensitivities are usually the result of an imbalance in the digestive system that affects the immune system. Food **intolerances** can be the result of reactions to certain compounds in food, such as histamine or monosodium glutamate (MSG).³¹ Food intolerances can also occur when a person is low in an enzyme, such as lactase for milk digestion.³²

Food **allergies** can cause severe symptoms after a food exposure, generally within minutes. So, food allergies are typically easier to identify than other food reactions.¹ You should not use the Elimination Diet to identify anaphylactic food reactions. Moreover, you should not eat a food that you were previously told to avoid due to food allergy and severe reactions, even if the food is listed on the Elimination Diet Food Plan.

Reduces inflammation: Food reactions can trigger inflammation and damage to your gut wall.^{17,18} Alcohol (even relatively low amounts) can also damage your gut lining.^{33,34} This enables microscopic food particles, harmful microbes, and toxins to pass through (sometimes called increased intestinal permeability or “leaky gut”). When immune system cells on the other side of your gut wall encounter these unwanted items, it sparks inflammation. Removing food triggers and alcohol from your food plan is intended to decrease inflammation and calm the immune system, potentially reducing your odds of other food reactions.^{16,29}

The intestinal lining is made of cells that replace themselves approximately every three days.³⁵ In a single week, every cell in the intestinal lining is broken down or sloughed off, and a new cell grows to take its place. Removing inflammatory trigger foods while supplying your body with anti-inflammatory, nutrient-dense foods supports the health of newly formed gut tissue. IFM’s Elimination Diet Food Plan includes many nutritious anti-inflammatory foods.

Supports a healthy microbiome: Much of a person’s overall health is determined by the health of their digestive tract. A notable portion of your immune defenses are in your gut.^{36,37} The gut immune system constantly monitors food that passes through your digestive tract. The way your immune system responds is impacted by the flora (bacteria and other microbes) that inhabit your gut.³⁸ The normal flora, also called the microbiome, helps regulate the immune response.³⁹

When your gut is inflamed, the amount of healthy versus unhealthy microbes in your microbiome can shift.^{40,41} This can impact your immune system and cause unwanted symptoms. Providing essential nutrients for healing is an important factor in creating a healthy microbiome as well as a healthy immune response.⁴²

A healthy gut microbiome can be rebuilt by eating a variety of whole foods, especially those rich in protein, phytonutrients (beneficial plant compounds), probiotics (good microbes), and prebiotics (such as fiber and phytonutrients that nourish microbes).^{42,43} These foods are the basis of the Elimination Diet.



Features of the Elimination Diet

Dairy-free: Dairy products are omitted from the Elimination Diet because they are frequently associated with food reactions. Dairy products are also commonly contaminated with antibiotics, hormones, and pesticides used in farming.^{44,45}

Lactose, the naturally occurring sugar in milk and other dairy products, can cause painful gas, bloating, and digestive upset in people who don't have enough lactase, the enzyme needed to digest lactose. Lactose intolerance affects over half of people globally but is more prevalent in some regions (including the United States, Asia, and Africa) than others.⁴⁶

Certain fermented dairy products (such as Greek yogurt) and hard cheeses (like cheddar) are naturally lower in lactose.⁴⁷ However, dairy products also contain casein, a milk protein that can cause adverse reactions.

Different types of casein are in milk, including "A1" and "A2," based on the kind of cow that makes it. Preliminary studies suggest that individuals who struggle to digest lactose or milk may see a decrease in some digestive issues with A2 milk versus standard milk (containing a mix of A1 and A2 casein).⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ However, larger studies are needed to confirm a real benefit. No animal milk is allowed during the elimination phase of the diet. If desired, you can ask your provider about trying A2 milk during the reintroduction phase.

The protein, carbohydrate, and fat composition of sheep, goat, and camel milk varies compared to cow's milk.⁵¹ Scientists are looking at whether these differences in alternative animal milks might result in less digestive upset in some individuals.⁵² Unfortunately, some people may also experience symptoms when consuming non-cow animal milk.⁵³ Neither cow milk nor alternative animal milks are allowed during the elimination phase of this food plan. Only non-dairy milk substitutes, such as coconut or rice milk, are included on the Elimination Diet.

Gluten-free: Gluten is a family of proteins found in common grains (barley, rye, and wheat) and products made from them (bread, cereal, crackers, pasta, etc.). Gluten is frequently linked with food reactions, so it is omitted from the Elimination Diet. This includes eliminating "hidden" sources of gluten, such as some sauces, dressings, and soups. Reading packaged food ingredients is crucial. (Note: If you plan to test for celiac disease or non-celiac gluten sensitivity, you must be consuming gluten in the weeks leading up to the test.⁵⁴ Consult your provider for details.)

Gluten may cause digestive and/or non-digestive symptoms.^{55,56} Proteins in gluten called gliadins can trigger an immune system reaction that breaks down the nutrient-absorbing cells in the small intestine.⁵⁷ Scientists are exploring how this breakdown promotes increased intestinal permeability and might contribute to food sensitivities, other digestive issues, and autoimmune conditions.^{58,59}

Components of wheat beyond gluten, including poorly absorbed carbohydrates called fructans, can also cause gut symptoms.^{60,61} In addition, wheat is often sprayed with glyphosate, one of the most widely used weed killers globally.^{8,62} Preliminary studies suggest glyphosate could disrupt the gut microbiome and promote inflammation.⁶³⁻⁶⁵



Dairy products and grains excluded on the Elimination Diet are shown in the following table. Check for these items in product ingredient lists, too.

Dairy Products	Grains (gluten-containing)
Butter	Barley
Cheese (all)	Bulgur
Half and half	Rye
Heavy cream	Seitan (gluten-based meat substitute)
Ice cream	Triticale
Kefir	Wheat (farro, Kamut, spelt, and all other varieties)
Milk	
Sour cream	
Yogurt	

Phytonutrients for gut health: The Elimination Diet includes a variety of colorful vegetables and fruits, which contain powerful phytonutrients that support health. For example, phytonutrients may help protect the health of cells in your gut.^{66,67}

Reduces toxic burden: The Elimination Diet encourages eating organic foods to lower the toxic burden in your body. It also encourages grass-fed, pasture-raised, and free-range sources of animal protein, as they are higher in healthy omega-3 fats than their corn-fed and caged counterparts.^{68,69} Eating organic can help reduce your exposure to artificial colorings, flavorings, sweeteners, and preservatives, along with pesticides and other chemicals.^{70,71}

The elimination of toxins already present in your body is also important. Many different nutrients are required to support detoxification. A shortage of any one of them could result in an increased toxic load. Eating whole plant foods supports digestive regularity to help lower the body's overall toxic burden.^{72,73} Drinking plenty of water is also important for the removal of toxins.⁷⁴

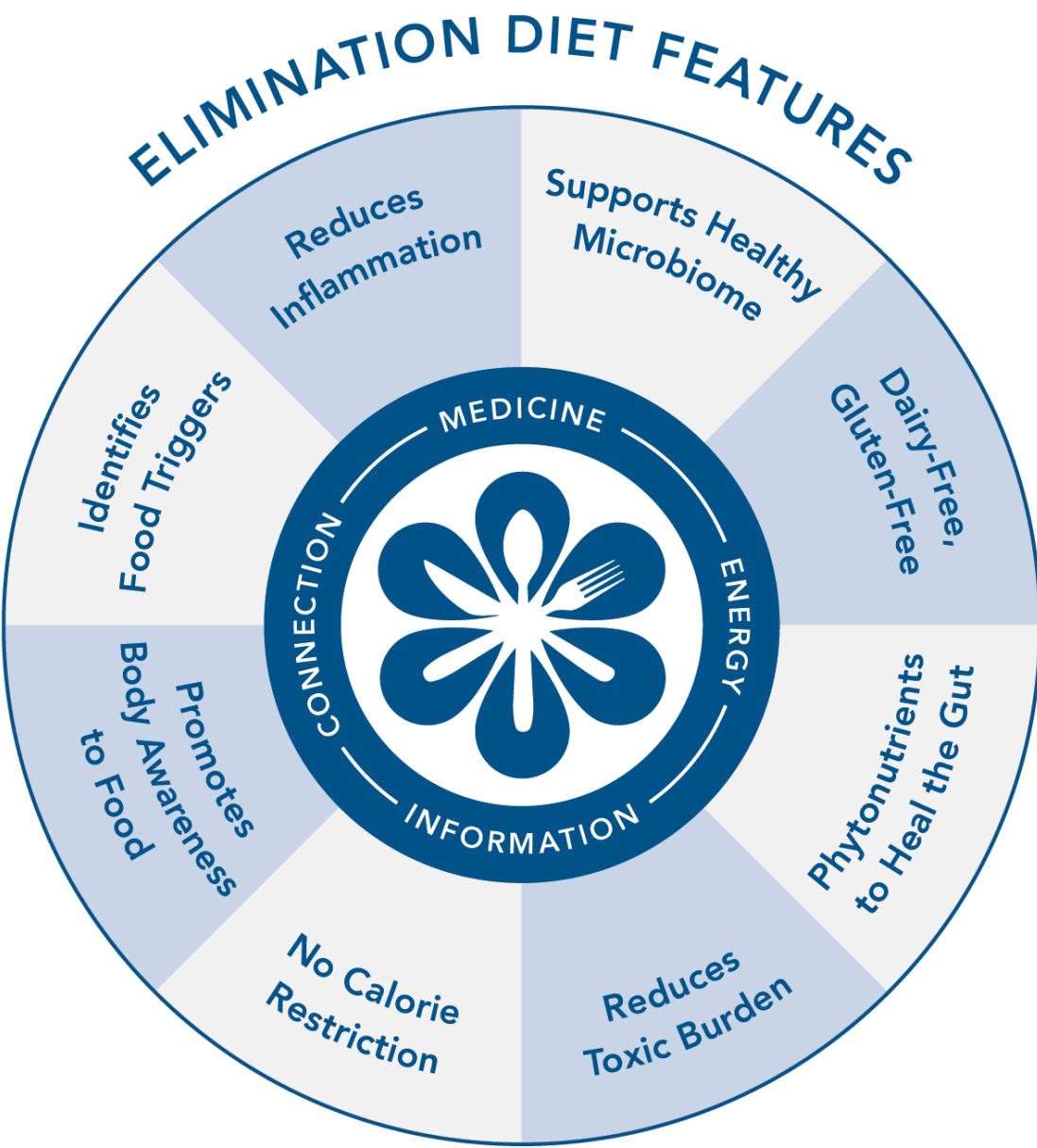
A person's toxic burden is a result of three main factors:⁷⁵

1. **Genetics:** Your genes may impact how well your body clears toxins.
2. **Toxins:** Exposure to toxins varies with diet, lifestyle, work, and where you live.
3. **Diet:** Whole foods rich in fiber support your body's ability to eliminate toxins.

No calorie restriction: Weight loss is not a goal of the Elimination Diet. Weight loss may (or may not) happen as the body begins to heal. Although tracking food intake is helpful, calorie counting is not required when following the Elimination Diet. However, it is essential that only the foods that appear on the food plan are eaten during the elimination phase. You can use the [Diet, Nutrition & Lifestyle Journal](#) to keep a record of what you eat, which can be helpful when there are unresolved symptoms. Sometimes, hidden ingredients are the culprit.

Promotes body awareness to food: After the elimination phase of the diet (which is intended to minimize or eliminate symptoms), you will "challenge" certain foods during the reintroduction phase. This helps identify food triggers that may cause your symptoms.⁷⁶ Many people develop a greater awareness of how specific foods make them feel. Moreover, as foods are carefully reintroduced, you may connect symptoms experienced prior to the Elimination Diet with specific foods. Dietary changes may also contribute to a shift in your sense of taste.^{77,78}

Features of the Elimination Diet



Touring Through the Food Plan

The Elimination Diet Food Plan provides a snapshot of the foods that are available to choose from every day.

To be successful in following the Elimination Diet, it is very important to know which foods to avoid and which foods are OK to eat. The following table is a summary. Your functional medicine provider can assist you with any needed customization for your individual situation.

Foods to Avoid	Foods to Eat
• Alcohol • Beef • Chocolate • Coffee, soft drinks, energy drinks, tea (black, green, oolong, white) • Corn • Dairy products • Eggs • Gluten-containing grains (all varieties of barley, rye, wheat) • Peanuts • Pork • Processed meats • Shellfish • Soy and soy products • Refined sugar (white sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, brown sugar, sucrose, etc.)	• Dairy alternatives • Fish • Fruits (only those listed on the food plan) • Game meats • Gluten-free whole grains (amaranth, buckwheat, millet, oats,* quinoa, rice, teff, etc.) • Healthy oils • Herbal tea (caffeine-free) • Legumes (except soy, peanuts) • Nuts (except peanuts) • Poultry • Seeds • Vegetables

*If you eat oats, look for ones that are certified gluten-free. Some individuals with celiac disease may also be unable to eat certified gluten-free oats, such as due to the presence of other bothersome proteins.⁷⁹ Follow your practitioner's advice about whether to include or omit oats.

Protein

Protein is a cornerstone of optimal nutrition. It performs multiple functions in the body, including helping support healthy blood sugar levels.⁸⁰ Also, the body cannot effectively eliminate toxins without amino acids. These building blocks of protein bind to toxins in the liver and help the body remove unwanted compounds.⁷⁵ So, it is very important to include some protein in meals and snacks.

You may notice that some of your usual protein sources, including beef and pork, are omitted from the Elimination Diet. Beef and pork are the most eaten red meats in the world.⁸¹ Unfortunately, more than 95% of animals used for meat in the United States eat GMO crops.⁸² Other countries also commonly use GMO crops to feed animals.⁸³ Another concern is that inflammatory environmental toxins are frequently found in conventionally grown red meats, particularly in the fat.^{84,85}

The Elimination Diet includes several alternative sources of animal and plant proteins. As with the other food categories, quality is important. High-quality proteins include lean, pasture-raised, grass-fed, organic, and non-GMO sources. Animal protein options include poultry (chicken, Cornish hen, turkey), bison, lamb, and wild game, such as deer and elk (venison).

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Other protein options on the Elimination Diet include low-mercury fish, such as halibut, herring, salmon, and sardines. Wild-caught, sustainable fish choices are preferred.⁸⁶ Shellfish are omitted from the Elimination Diet as they are often contaminated with toxins, particularly when farmed.^{87,88}

Vegetarian protein choices include legumes, lentils, peas, spirulina, and select protein powders (hemp, pea, and rice).⁸⁹ Check the ingredients of protein powders to see if anything was added to them, especially items not allowed on the Elimination Diet (such as sugar and chocolate, including cocoa or cacao).

Legumes

Legumes, such as beans and lentils, are a nutritious source of protein and complex carbohydrates. These nutrients promote a sense of fullness and help support blood sugar control compared with refined carbohydrates like white rice or bread.⁹⁰⁻⁹²

Try eating at least one serving of legumes daily, such as in soup or salad. Also, enjoy cooked beans and bean dips like hummus. If you aren't used to eating legumes, increase your intake gradually to give your digestive system time to adjust. For example, start by sprinkling a tablespoon of chickpeas on a leafy green salad.



Dairy Alternatives

You can choose from several cow's milk alternatives in this food plan, mostly in the form of "milk" made from nuts and seeds. Dairy substitutes like almond, coconut, flaxseed, or hazelnut milk often contain added sweeteners or thickeners (such as xanthan gum). Read ingredient lists to avoid additives that could trigger a reaction.

The Elimination Diet also includes fermented foods like unsweetened coconut kefir and coconut yogurt because of their probiotic content, which may support gut health and overall health.⁹³ That said, some individuals who consume fermented foods, even if they're non-dairy like coconut kefir, may notice digestive discomfort or other symptoms. If this is true for you, discuss it with your functional medicine practitioner, who can help identify the root cause.

Nuts & Seeds

It is generally advised to eat a small handful of nuts and seeds daily.^{94,95} Regularly eating nuts may help lower heart disease risk.^{96,97} Many nuts and seeds are included in the Elimination Diet. Raw or dry-roasted, unsalted nuts and seeds are preferred.

Nuts and seeds can be added to meals for a nutrient and flavor boost. Sprinkle nuts and seeds on top of salads and vegetable dishes or eat them as a snack. Flaxseeds and hempseeds can be ground and stirred into smoothies or sprinkled on salads. Nut butters like almond butter, cashew butter, and tahini (sesame seed butter) can be used as condiments, spread on fruit, or drizzled over vegetables.

Many people are allergic or sensitive to nuts. Your functional medicine practitioner may recommend a modified version of this food plan if allergies or sensitivities to nuts are known or suspected.

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Fats & Oils

A large selection of fats and oils can be used for homemade salad dressing and cooking while following the Elimination Diet. Choices include minimally refined, cold-pressed, organic, non-GMO fats and liquid oils, as these will be the best quality. Regularly consuming these high-quality fats is recommended for helping control inflammation, which is important for gut health.^{98,99}

Extra-virgin olive oil is an excellent choice. Studies suggest extra-virgin olive oil supports both heart and liver health.¹⁰⁰⁻¹⁰⁴ The beneficial components of olive oil are also found in whole olives, which are included in this category on the food plan.¹⁰⁵

Another high-quality fat included in the Elimination Diet is avocado oil. Unlike many other plant-based oils that are pressed from seeds, avocado oil is pressed from the fruit itself. In addition to being good sources of healthy fat, avocados and their oils are nutrient-dense and antioxidant-rich.^{106,107}

Sesame oil is included in the Elimination Diet to support liver function and help protect against inflammation.^{108,109} Other oils included in the Fats & Oils category include almond oil, flaxseed oil, hempseed oil, and walnut oil, among others.

If you want a solid fat on the Elimination Diet, ghee or clarified butter is a good option, if you don't have a milk allergy.¹¹⁰ While ghee is technically a dairy product, most of the potentially problematic components—casein (milk protein) and lactose (milk sugar)—are removed during the manufacturing process, leaving nearly pure fat.^{111,112} Choose organic ghee sourced from grass-fed cows.



Canned coconut milk (regular or light) is included in the “Fats & Oils” category on the Elimination Diet because it is predominantly a source of fat. Most metal cans are lined with a chemical called bisphenol A (BPA). So, look for BPA-free cans when buying canned coconut milk. Alternatively, purchase boxed coconut milk. Boxed coconut milk tends to be significantly lower in fat and is classified as a “Dairy Alternative” on the Elimination Diet.

Fats and liquid oils can be damaged by heat, light, and oxygen. Liquid oils should be stored in tightly-sealed, tinted glass (not plastic) containers and kept in a cool, dark area. They should not be kept near the stove and should be discarded if they smell rancid.

Non-Starchy and Starchy Vegetables

The Elimination Diet emphasizes eating plenty of colorful vegetables, preferably organic. Ideally you should eat at least nine servings of colorful, phytonutrient-rich plant foods daily, primarily vegetables.

Cruciferous vegetables are a fantastic choice while following the Elimination Diet. Cruciferous vegetables, such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, bok choy, and arugula, contain nutrients that support the body's detoxification systems.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁵

You should also try to eat a “rainbow of colors” each day. All colors of vegetables provide a variety of impressive health benefits. While darker-colored plants are



Touring Through the Food Plan



generally higher in phytonutrients, even vegetables from the white and tan family are healthful and nutritious.^{116,117}

Fruits

Phytonutrient-rich fruits may help protect cells from inflammation.¹¹⁸ Eating a piece of fruit is a good option when you want something sweet. It is better to eat fruit alongside a bit of protein, such as nuts or nut butter, to offset any potential blood sugar spikes.¹¹⁹

Fruit can be fresh or frozen, but avoid fruit with added sweeteners. Small amounts of unsweetened dried fruit can be eaten occasionally. Buy it at a store or make your own dehydrated fruit. As with vegetables, buy organic fruit whenever possible.

The Elimination Diet includes a wide range of nutritious fruits, such as apples, blackberries, blueberries, kiwifruit, pomegranate seeds, strawberries, and raspberries. Here are some of their potential benefits:

- **Apples** contain phytonutrients that may help control inflammation and support blood vessel health.^{120,121} Apples may be eaten raw or stewed with cinnamon for added flavor.
- **Berries** contain anti-inflammatory compounds. They may be especially helpful for supporting brain and heart health.¹²²⁻¹²⁴
- **Kiwifruit** is associated with better digestion and healthy bowel movements.¹²⁵⁻¹²⁷ Kiwifruit is especially rich in fiber if you eat the skin.
- **Pomegranates** are linked with anti-inflammatory and heart health benefits in studies.^{128,129}

Citrus fruits are also included in the Elimination Diet. However, your functional medicine practitioner may recommend that you temporarily avoid these fruits in cases of a known or suspected sensitivity.

Gluten-Free Grains

Gluten-free whole grains are allowed on the Elimination Diet as they provide fiber and phytonutrients.¹³⁰ These components may contribute to the anti-inflammatory benefits associated with whole grains.^{131,132} Common examples of gluten-free whole grains include amaranth, brown rice, buckwheat (kasha), millet, quinoa, sorghum, and teff.

Gluten contamination is an issue with oats and potentially other gluten-free grains when those grains are grown near wheat, rye, or barley.¹³³ Contamination is also a risk when gluten-free and gluten-containing grains are transported and processed using the same equipment. When purchasing oats, check for a certified gluten-free seal on the package. Contact the manufacturer if the package is unclear. This is especially important for those with celiac disease and other individuals who are highly sensitive to gluten.¹³⁴

Touring Through the Food Plan



Beverages

It is important to drink plenty of clean, filtered water throughout the day. Hydration supports regular bowel movements and metabolism.^{135,136} Adequate water intake has also been linked to positive effects on mood, energy, and brain function.¹³⁷⁻¹⁴⁰

In addition to filtered water, low-sodium broths (vegetable, bone), meat stocks, and other caffeine-free beverages like fresh, raw, cold-pressed vegetable juices are also good liquid choices. Herbal teas (if caffeine-free) are also allowed on the Elimination Diet. Some people enjoy drinking a simple cup of hot water with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice.

If you are accustomed to adding cream to certain herbal teas, such as peppermint or rooibos, avoid non-dairy creamers. These highly processed creamers contain refined sugars and unhealthy fats. Instead, use one of the non-dairy milk substitutes like almond or coconut milk in place of milk and creamer.

Both artificially sweetened and regular soft drinks should also be eliminated. Try substituting seltzer water with lemon wedges or a splash of coconut water.

Spices and Condiments

Herbs and spices are great choices while following the Elimination Diet, as they provide a variety of beneficial plant compounds and add flavor to meals. For example, turmeric is associated with anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving benefits.¹⁴¹⁻¹⁴³ Ginger has been used worldwide to support health due, in part, to its link with digestive health benefits.^{144,145}



Most condiments in stores are not allowed on the Elimination Diet because they typically contain additives like sweeteners and preservatives. Many condiments are made with soy, which is also avoided on the Elimination Diet. Using a few approved ingredients, you can make homemade versions of some condiments, such as ketchup, barbecue sauce, and salad dressing.

Bottled mustards (Dijon, stone-ground, etc.) made without added sugars are permitted. Most kinds of vinegar—such as apple cider, balsamic (without added sugar), distilled white, ume plum, and red or white wine vinegar—are allowed. However, even these condiments should be used sparingly.

Malt vinegar is not included in the Elimination Diet because it is made from barley (a gluten-containing grain) and isn't distilled to remove gluten. Asian rice vinegar may be made with a blend of grains, so check the label to see if it is gluten-free.

A Note About Chocolate

Cocoa (and cacao, a term sometimes used for minimally processed forms of the cacao bean) has benefits in an otherwise healthy diet. However, all cocoa products (like hot cocoa and chocolate) are typically excluded from the Elimination Diet because of their caffeine and sugar content. Your functional medicine practitioner can provide further guidance on chocolate.

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A Note About Sweeteners

The following sweeteners, in very small amounts, are generally acceptable on the Elimination Diet: brown rice syrup, blackstrap molasses, pure maple syrup, raw honey, coconut sugar, agave nectar, pure monk fruit extract, and stevia. Use no more than three teaspoons daily of all sweeteners combined. Note that pure stevia leaf extract (without additives or fillers) is a high-intensity sweetener that requires no more than a pinch for maximum sweetness.

What Not to Use: Artificial sweeteners (such as sucralose, saccharin, acesulfame K, and aspartame), table sugar, and other processed sweeteners are not advised on this program. Artificial sweeteners may interfere with appetite control and may fail to curb a preference for sweetened foods.^{146,147}

Many sweeteners, such as high-fructose corn syrup and dextrose, are primarily derived from corn, which is eliminated on this program. Corn-derived sweeteners and sugar made from sugar beets are commonly genetically modified (GMO).⁸² In addition, high-fructose corn syrup can cause intolerance issues in some individuals due to difficulty absorbing high amounts of fructose.¹⁴⁸

Studies have linked a higher sugar intake with more gut symptoms in people with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).^{149,150} High sugar intake may also contribute to an undesirable increase in intestinal permeability.^{151,152}

Getting the Nutrients You Need

As already mentioned, the Elimination Diet is a short-term diet. A big reason for this is that when you exclude many foods, especially for a long time, you are at greater risk of nutritional deficiency. Finding alternative dietary sources of nutrients becomes especially important if you discover you will need to omit a food long term. However, even during the brief elimination phase, you can make a greater effort to get nutrients you may fall short of.

Following are some examples of nutrients that can be more challenging to get when you omit common staple foods, along with alternative sources of the nutrients. Consult your functional medicine practitioner for additional guidance.

Food Omitted	Alternative Nutrient Sources
Milk/dairy	• Calcium: broccoli, chickpeas, kale, sardines^{153,154} • Riboflavin: mushrooms, poultry, quinoa, salmon^{155,156} • Iodine: seafood, seaweed, iodized salt¹⁵⁷
Wheat	• B vitamins: amaranth, buckwheat, quinoa¹⁵⁸
Beef/pork	• Iron: poultry, seafood, wild game, legumes¹⁵⁹
Eggs	• Vitamin A (including beta-carotene): cod liver oil, carrots, spinach, sweet potato^{160,161} • Biotin: salmon, sunflower seeds¹⁶²

Touring Through the Food Plan

Following are substitutions for times when you want a certain food or ingredient but need to avoid it while on the Elimination Diet.

When you want this ...	... eat this
Milk (for cereal or shakes), yogurt, cheese	Unsweetened almond, coconut, flaxseed, hazelnut, hemp, oat (certified gluten-free), rice, or sunflower seed milk substitutes; unsweetened coconut yogurt or kefir. Read labels to ensure substitutes are lactose-free and milk-free.
Hot cereal	Certified gluten-free oatmeal or steel-cut oats, rice cereal, buckwheat groats, quinoa flakes, or Apple Cinnamon Amaranth Porridge*
Cold cereal	Puffed rice and millet, crispy brown rice, and amaranth cereals (if labeled gluten-free). Note that corn is often used in gluten-free foods like cereal.
Bread, crackers, or pasta	Gluten-free breads, crackers, or pasta made with alternative flours, such as amaranth, bean, brown rice, buckwheat, cassava, millet, oat, potato, quinoa, sorghum, tapioca, and teff. Check labels to ensure the foods are gluten-free and made with acceptable sweeteners.
Quick bread	Chia Seed Applesauce Bread,* Pumpkin Oatmeal Pancakes*
Breading	Grind any allowed gluten-free crackers or bread, or use almond meal (or other nut meal/flour), ground chia seeds, unsweetened coconut flakes, or coconut flour
Eggs	Store-bought vegan egg replacer, or blend 1 tablespoon flaxseed meal or chia seeds in a blender with ¼ cup water and allow to thicken for a few minutes
Peanut butter	Nut or seed butters made from almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamias, walnuts, pumpkin seeds, or sesame seeds (tahini)
Ice cream	Various brands of rice or coconut-based frozen desserts; read labels carefully to see if they contain acceptable sweeteners
Soft drinks	Sparkling or mineral water mixed with a squeeze of lemon or lime, or with a small amount of your favorite juice (¾ water, ¼ juice); filtered or purified water with slices of lemon or lime; unsweetened coconut water
Coffee, tea	Herbal tea (caffeine-free)
Butter or margarine	Coconut oil or ghee (clarified butter)
Sugar/sweeteners	Agave nectar, blackstrap molasses, brown rice syrup, coconut sugar, pure maple syrup, raw honey, stevia, pure monk fruit extract, unsweetened apple butter
Condiments	Vinegars (excluding malt vinegar); herbs and spices, such as salt, pepper, basil, carob, cinnamon, cumin, dill, garlic, ginger, mustard, oregano, parsley, rosemary, tarragon, thyme, turmeric, etc. Be sure to read labels. Bottled mustard, for example, sometimes contains gluten due to the use of malt vinegar.

*Recipes marked with an asterisk are available in IFM's [Elimination Diet Weekly Planner and Recipes](#) handout.

The Reintroduction Process

The Food Reintroduction Process

To identify potential food triggers, reintroduce each food omitted during the elimination phase one at a time, generally every three days. Your functional medicine provider can guide you as to when to begin this process. It is important that you are free of significant symptoms prior to starting food reintroduction. This will help you to identify if a test food triggers symptoms.

- 1. Choose a test food.** On the first day of the reintroduction phase, choose a test food that was excluded during the elimination phase. You do not need to reintroduce foods in a particular order.
- 2. Eat the test food.** You can eat up to 2-3 servings of the test food on Day 1. Watch for a reaction on Day 1 and the next two days (total of 72 hours). During those three days, record any symptoms on the **Food Reintroduction – Symptoms Tracker** (available from your functional medicine practitioner). Reintroduce only one new food at a time.
- 3. Challenge another food.** If there is no reaction to the food during the three-day period, keep that food in your food plan and reintroduce a second food on Day 4. As you did with the first test food, watch for any symptoms on that day and the next two days. If there is no reaction, keep that food in your diet and test the third challenge food, and so on.

If you suspect a food may be causing symptoms but are not sure, stop eating that food immediately, wait until symptoms clear, and then reintroduce the next food. After testing all the challenge foods, try the suspect food again using the same procedure just described.



The Reintroduction Process

Foods to Reintroduce

For each food you excluded on the Elimination Diet, identify and test a pure form containing no additives or ingredients that you eliminated, such as sugar or preservatives. Following are examples of average portion sizes of some of the foods you may try to reintroduce.

Food/Group	Challenge Food Examples and Average Portion Sizes
Barley, rye (gluten)*	Cooked barley or rye cereal: ½ cup 100% rye crackers: 2-3 crackers
Corn	Fresh or frozen corn kernels: ½ cup or 1 small cob
Dairy	Milk (skim, 1%, 2%, or whole milk): 1 cup Cheese (any whole milk cheese, no additives): 1 ounce
Egg	Hard, soft boiled, or poached: 2 eggs†
Peanuts	Raw or dry roasted peanuts: ¼ cup nuts Peanut butter made only of 100% peanuts: 2 tablespoons
Pork or Beef	Cooked meat, not in a casserole: 3-6 ounces
Shellfish	Challenge each type of shellfish separately: 3-6 ounces
Soy	Edamame: ½ cup Soy milk: 1 cup Tofu, tempeh: ½ cup
Wheat (gluten)	Cooked 100% hot whole wheat cereal: ½ cup 100% whole wheat noodles: 1 cup

*It is not unusual to react to wheat but not other gluten-containing grains (barley and rye).

†Your practitioner may suggest trying egg yolks first, then the whole egg with the white.

Tips for Selecting Challenge Foods

Reintroduce simple foods rather than complex foods with multiple ingredients. For example, test spaghetti noodles, not pizza or lasagna, which contain dairy (cheese) and wheat/gluten. Similarly, test milk, not ice cream, which likely contains sweeteners, eggs, soy, or other ingredients you will need to challenge separately.

Chocolate can also be tricky to test since it is often made with sugar and soy lecithin. Unsweetened raw cacao nibs are one of the simplest forms of chocolate you could challenge. Or make hot cocoa with unsweetened cocoa powder and an allowed milk alternative and sweetener.

Do not test coffee with a mocha drink that contains coffee and chocolate or a coffee drink that contains dairy (milk or creamer). Instead, choose plain black coffee for the challenge.

After completing the initial testing of all the foods that were removed during the Elimination Diet, it may also be useful to test individual foods within a single food category to see if you are sensitive to certain forms of the food.

The Reintroduction Process

For example, within the dairy category, test cheese made from cow's milk, sheep's milk, or goat's milk. Yogurt and butter may often be tolerated when milk is not. In the wheat category, test sprouted wheat products, spelt, emmer/farro, einkorn, and other ancient forms of wheat or sourdough (if you don't have celiac disease and are not gluten intolerant).

Consult your functional medicine practitioner if you have questions when reintroducing foods.

Reactions to Challenge Foods

Stop eating any foods that produce a clear negative reaction. Your **Food Reintroduction – Symptoms Tracker** will be invaluable for helping identify problem foods. The tracker lists the following types of symptoms that may surface during a food challenge:¹⁶³⁻¹⁶⁵

- Digestion/bowel function (such as abdominal pain, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, gas, etc.)
- Joint/muscle aches
- Headache/pressure
- Nasal or chest congestion (such as sinus pain or runny nose)
- Kidney/bladder function
- Skin (such as rashes, itching, flushing, or breakouts)
- Energy level (such as fatigue)
- Sleep (such as insomnia)
- Other symptoms (such as mood swings, anxiety, concentration problems, rapid pulse, or blood pressure changes)

If certain foods clearly provoke symptoms, avoid them for another three to six months. During this time, your functional medicine practitioner may recommend medical foods or dietary supplements to help support healing.

Helpful Hints

Plan for success: Shop for the food you will need in advance. Make sure each food you buy is on the Elimination Diet Food Plan. If you have foods at home that will tempt you, store them out of sight or donate them, if possible.

Read ingredient lists on all packaged foods: Ask your functional medicine provider for IFM's [Hidden Food Allergens](#) handout, which lists less obvious sources of foods and ingredients to avoid. If a food is not on the Elimination Diet Food Plan, do not eat it. If you are uncertain, ask your functional medicine provider.

Don't go hungry: Add extra vegetables and fruits or other allowed foods to your menu as needed. The menu needs a personal touch for your taste preferences. If you feel overwhelmed with meal planning, reach out to your practitioner.

Eat regularly: Eating at regular intervals during the day will help keep blood sugar stable. Eat suggested snacks as needed for hunger or cravings. Keep homemade salad dressing on hand for a quick lunch salad.

Dine at home: Eating out is generally not advised, as it is hard to know all the ingredients within a meal. Travel is also best avoided during this time. Following the Elimination Diet while on the road can be tough. If you must take a trip, plan your meals and bring foods that will travel well. Look for a hotel suite with a kitchen.

Choose organic: Whenever possible, select fresh foods and organically grown fruits and vegetables to reduce your intake of pesticides and chemical residues. Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly.

Buy cold-pressed oils: Cold-pressed oils are extracted from their source under carefully controlled temperatures and without chemicals. This results in a higher-quality, more nutritious oil.¹⁶⁶ Just be aware that cold-pressed oils could contain allergy-causing proteins since they are not refined.¹⁶⁷

Wean off caffeine gradually: Caffeine-containing beverages—such as coffee, regular tea (non-herbal), energy drinks, and soft drinks—are not included on the Elimination Diet. Caffeine withdrawal can result in unpleasant symptoms like headaches and irritability.¹⁶⁸ The symptoms may start as soon as 12 hours after eliminating the substance and may continue for more than a week.¹⁶⁹

If you are a regular caffeine user, reduce your caffeine intake slowly prior to beginning the Elimination Diet to prevent or reduce withdrawal symptoms. For example, try drinking half decaf/half regular coffee for a few days. Then, slowly continue to reduce your intake of all caffeine.

Drink enough water: Remember to drink plenty of plain, filtered water each day. Add freshly squeezed lemon or lime juice for extra flavor.

Get enough rest: Your functional medicine practitioner may recommend limiting high-intensity exercise for part of this program or, in some cases, for the entire program. This rest period allows the body to heal without the additional burden of exercise. Adequate rest and stress reduction are important to the success of this program. A light daily walk may be the perfect exercise during this time.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the difference between a food allergy, sensitivity, and intolerance?

Food allergies cause severe symptoms, generally immediately after a food is eaten and consistently after every exposure. An allergic response will result in the immune system identifying the food as foreign and will cause allergic symptoms (swelling, itching, breathing difficulties, etc.), many of which can be life-threatening.

Food sensitivities usually result from a digestive system imbalance that affects the immune system. Often, food sensitivities cause delayed symptoms (a few hours to a few days after eating the food), so they are more difficult to match to the trigger.

Food intolerances are reactions to certain food components (such as lactose, MSG, or histamine) that can happen when a person is low in an enzyme or nutrient needed to break down that compound. So, the body is unable to properly process certain foods.

Your functional medicine practitioner can help you determine whether a food sensitivity or food intolerance is present.

Are there any other foods I should avoid?

Besides the foods omitted from the Elimination Diet, specific compounds in certain foods may cause adverse reactions in some individuals. These include histamine, oxalate, salicylate, nickel, and nightshades, as briefly described here:

- **Histamine:** Higher histamine levels are naturally found in certain foods, such as avocado, fermented foods, nuts, some seafood, spinach, and tomato. Some individuals are low in enzymes needed to break down histamine.¹⁷⁰
- **Oxalate:** Leafy green vegetables, such as spinach and Swiss chard, are especially rich in oxalate. People with certain health conditions, such as those prone to kidney stones, may need to limit their oxalate intake.¹⁷¹
- **Salicylate:** Though best-known for its presence in some pain relievers (such as aspirin), salicylate also occurs naturally in foods. Some dietary sources of salicylate are cucumber, green beans, pineapple, strawberries, and many herbs and spices.^{172,173}
- **Nickel:** Certain foods contain a relatively high amount of nickel, potentially causing digestive and other symptoms in nickel-reactive individuals. Some foods rich in nickel include black tea, chickpeas, lettuce, nuts, and oats.¹⁷⁴
- **Nightshades:** Commonly consumed foods in the nightshade plant family include bell peppers, tomatoes, and potatoes. Whether such foods contribute to symptoms in conditions such as arthritis or irritable bowel syndrome in select individuals is unclear. These are areas that scientists are researching to learn more.^{175,176}

Your functional medicine provider may have you avoid foods that contain high amounts of such compounds if they are suspected to be causing symptoms. Consult your provider for more information.

Frequently Asked Questions

Should I avoid lectins?

Lectins are proteins that plants make to protect themselves against predators. Some top sources of lectins are legumes and whole wheat, among other sources like nightshades (tomatoes, potatoes), garlic, and peanuts.^{177,178} Soaking, boiling, sprouting, or fermenting such foods can significantly reduce the lectin content.^{179,180}

Everyone should avoid eating hard/undercooked legumes, as this can cause food poisoning due to the very high lectin content.^{181,182} Whether smaller amounts of lectins are problematic is a subject of debate and may depend on the individual. Consult your functional medicine provider for guidance.

What if legumes usually cause gas and bloating?

Try to increase your intake of legumes slowly over one to three weeks. Soaking beans for 30 minutes up to 6 hours (or overnight) before cooking and then discarding the water may also decrease issues with gas. Pressure cooking could make legumes easier to digest, too.¹⁸³ If canned legumes are used, draining and rinsing them is helpful. Some people find lentils and green peas easier to digest than other legumes. If you have trouble digesting these foods, your functional medicine practitioner can help you determine if a food intolerance is present.

Can I take a blood test rather than following the Elimination Diet?

The desire to see “proof” of a food sensitivity is understandable. However, the results of blood tests are not as reliable as eliminating and then challenging foods. That said, if you wish to pursue food sensitivity testing to help personalize an elimination diet, talk with your functional medicine provider.^{2,184} The cost of testing should also be considered.

Note that food intolerances (such as lactose intolerance) won’t show up on a food sensitivity test if your immune system is not involved in your body’s reaction. However, other tests may help in detecting certain intolerances. For example, a hydrogen breath test may be used to help identify lactose intolerance.¹⁸⁵

What if the Elimination Diet doesn’t resolve my symptoms?

When the Elimination Diet does not improve symptoms, it may be necessary to investigate further with your functional medicine practitioner. It is essential to assess whether the Elimination Diet was consistently followed and whether the food challenges were carried out correctly. It is easy to overlook a hidden ingredient or make other mistakes while following this plan.

To achieve good results, it is necessary to follow the diet 100% of the time. If the diet was followed properly but didn’t produce the desired results, your functional medicine provider may recommend another approach.

Frequently Asked Questions



What do I eat in place of bread?

Rice cakes and tortillas made from almond, cassava, rice, or other gluten-free flours and allowed ingredients can be substituted for bread. Also consider eating less grain carbohydrates during the Elimination Diet. For example, you could use a large lettuce leaf as a substitute “wrap” for vegetables or meats.

What additional spices or flavorings can be used?

All spices and herbs are generally encouraged as they enhance the natural flavors of food and contain powerful phytonutrients for health. Experiment with various herbs and spices. For maximum flavor, add fresh herbs near the end of cooking and dried herbs near the start.

Which condiments can I use?

The two main types of bottled condiments allowed on the Elimination Diet are vinegar and mustard. (For further discussion, see page 13.) Some common bottled condiments you should avoid while on the Elimination Diet include barbecue sauce, chocolate, chutney, ketchup, relish, soy sauce, tamari, teriyaki, and sweet and sour pickles. These condiments are often made with soy and/or sweeteners like sugar and high-fructose corn syrup. You can make your own version of some of these condiments using allowed ingredients.

Could canned vegetables be used instead of fresh vegetables?

Fresh and frozen vegetables are generally preferred over canned because less processed forms may retain more nutrients and/or can help you limit salt, additives, and chemical contaminants like BPA.¹⁸⁶⁻¹⁸⁸ Canned legumes (chickpeas, black beans, kidney beans, etc.) and tomatoes are generally acceptable. Rinse canned legumes well before using. Draining and rinsing canned beans may help ease digestion. If buying canned vegetables and beans, choose those in BPA-free cans, if possible.

What do I do if I am unsure whether a food reaction has occurred?

If you are unsure a food reaction has happened, it is best to challenge that food again. Be sure there are no unusual circumstances on a food challenge day (such as a very stressful day, a night of poor sleep, or a day of travel). If you are having any symptoms, such as a headache, it is best to delay the reintroduction of food. Be sure you eat enough of the food to create a good challenge. If no reaction happens the second time, then that food is probably not a trigger food.

If all trigger foods are avoided for 3 months, how do I know when it is fine to eat them again?

After three months, try to challenge the foods again. If there is a reaction, try again after another three to six months. A few food triggers may never be resolved—no matter how long you avoid that food, the reactions will still occur.

If a food is rechallenged and found to be acceptable, how often may I eat it?

The answer is different for everyone. Even if you have no reaction on rechallenging, it may be worthwhile to wait at least four days before trying it again. If a minor reaction is experienced, wait a week between each time you eat it. Each person responds differently, so cultivating body awareness is important.

Also, remember to get a lot of variety in your eating plan to maximize nutrition. Challenge yourself to avoid eating the same foods every day.

How is the Elimination Diet from IFM different from other elimination diets?

Many types of elimination diets exist. Elimination diets range from very restrictive (eating only one food a day or just a few foods each day) to less restrictive (eliminating only one food or food group).

The Elimination Diet from IFM was developed to help identify problem foods, particularly when there is no suggestion of which foods may be connected to long-term complaints. This food plan eliminates gluten-containing grains, dairy products, pork, beef, corn, eggs, soy, peanuts, shellfish, coffee/caffeine, alcohol, chocolate, and refined sweeteners.

Can anyone do the Elimination Diet?

The Elimination Diet may not be appropriate for individuals with special nutrition needs, such as pregnant or lactating women, children, and those who are underweight or nutrient deficient. A qualified health practitioner can help determine if the Elimination Diet is needed and appropriate in such cases.

Individuals with a history of an eating disorder or a challenging relationship with food (such as orthorexia nervosa, a harmful obsession with healthy eating) are generally not good candidates for the Elimination Diet. That said, if the Elimination Diet is necessary, your care team should include qualified mental health, medical, and nutrition professionals.

What are the risks of the Elimination Diet?

Though elimination diets are commonly and successfully used, they are not without risk. IFM's Elimination Diet should only be used under the supervision of your functional medicine provider. In addition, anyone with a history of food allergy and anaphylaxis should work with a qualified practitioner who can diagnose and treat food allergies.

Individuals with a history of allergy and anaphylaxis, including skin-related allergy symptoms, have a higher risk of developing an allergy to previously tolerated foods after a period of elimination.¹⁸⁹⁻¹⁹¹ This may result in immediate allergic reactions and anaphylaxis to reintroduced foods after an elimination diet.^{192,193} Consult your healthcare provider for guidance if you have a history of allergy.

Resources and Tools for Success

Even though this is a short-term food plan, completing an elimination diet can be a complex and sometimes confusing process. Included in this food plan suite are recipes, snack suggestions, a shopping list, and other information to make this plan much easier to follow. Look over this information carefully. If you have any questions or concerns about this food plan, please ask your functional medicine provider for guidance.

Your functional medicine practitioner may supply you with the following handouts to assist with using IFM's Elimination Diet:

- **Elimination Diet Food Plan (food list)**
- **Elimination Diet – Weekly Planner and Recipes**
- **Diet, Nutrition & Lifestyle Journal – 7 Day**
- **Food Reintroduction – Symptoms Tracker**
- **Hidden Food Allergens**
- **Phytonutrient Spectrum Foods – Elimination Diet**

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