



THE FAT TRAP

Having allergies and gaining weight doesn't have to go hand in hand. Learning how to manage your intolerances, and cutting out trigger foods, could be the key to a slimmer you WORDS CORA LYDON



It's tempting to blame your spare tyre directly on your allergies. Sticking to the same foods day in, day out isn't good for your health. Take myself as a case in point – for years my diet consisted of chicken and potatoes (not due to an allergy per se, just extreme pickiness), but I had a hunch that my limited diet was to blame for my extra pounds.

One year ago, I paid a visit to Penny Povey, a medical herbalist who specialises in Vega Allergy Testing. She confirmed that my restricted food intake had been doing me harm and that I had actually become intolerant to the foods I ate most regularly.

According to nutritionist Liz Tucker, food intolerance can often cause an overload in the gut: 'Your digestive system becomes sluggish so it takes longer for foods to be digested. You end up with a backlog of food waiting to be broken down and your system will struggle to cope,' she says. 'Plus, when you are intolerant to a food its energy is drafted in to fuel the immune response it provokes, so you are less likely to be burning off the calories you have eaten.'

Armed with this knowledge, I cut the offending foods out of my diet and the weight dropped off. Ask anyone who's ever cut out their trigger foods and they'll tell you about the amazing, often instant results they have seen. But does this mean that handling your allergies and intolerances more effectively could help you drop a dress size?

The 'eau down

Before you get too excited, the whole idea that cutting certain foods out of your diet can produce dramatic weight loss results points to the fact that it's actually water, rather than fat, that you're losing.

Experts agree: 'In some cases, food allergies can lead to oedema: water retention, puffy hands, feet and ankles,' says nutritionist Emma Wells of Smart Nutrition. 'So, when you first give up the offending food, excess water disappears and, hey presto, so does a lot of the weight.'

Water retention can pile on as much as ten pounds, but with a few simple tweaks to your diet, the weight could be lost in a matter of days. So why do food intolerances and allergies make you more susceptible to holding water?

'Histamine, the stuff that makes you sneeze when pollen enters your nose, makes tiny blood vessels called capillaries leakier,' explains Patrick Holford, co-author of *Hidden Food Allergies – is what you eat making*

you ill? (£7.99, Piatkus Books). 'This allows the immune system's army of white blood cells to move into the battlefield – your tissues. At the same time, fluid accompanying the white blood cells passes into your tissues, where it's retained for days, even weeks.'

Now imagine this happening on a daily basis and you can begin to understand why your body can quite literally become waterlogged. So how can you tell if the extra pounds that are stubbornly refusing to shift are due to your body retaining water? Take a look at the following statements:

- **Do you ever experience sudden, unexplained fluctuations in your weight?**
- **Can you easily gain or lose three or more pounds in just one day?**
- **Does your face look quite puffy, particularly around the eyes?**
- **Do you have noticeable bags under your eyes?**
- **When you press your abdomen does it feel waterlogged and bloated?**
- **Do you often need to loosen your clothes after eating a normal-sized meal?**
- **Do your ankles and/or fingers ever swell up?**
- **Do you have dry skin or dandruff?**

According to Patrick if you answer yes to three or more the chances are that water retention is partly, or mainly, to blame for excess weight

Be tolerant

An allergic response triggers a chemical process in our body and this process can also cause weight problems.

According to Patrick Holford, the more frequent your allergic reactions are, the more resistant you become to insulin, the hormone that keeps blood sugar in balance. Apparently, the more resistant we are to it, the more our body will create the hormone to compensate.

On the flip side, to help you deal with an allergic response your body releases cytokines, which leave you less responsive to insulin. With continuously high insulin levels, blood sugar levels are kept low, leaving you craving sugary carbs. If you give in to temptation, then it's only a matter of time before those biscuits take up residence on your hips.

Sally Kappler, head of nutrition at Immogenics Ltd, a nutrition programme that identifies food sensitivities and helps you to shed weight, adds: 'When a person consumes a food that they are sensitive to, an immune response occurs. This can change the way the body uses food, causing it to shift from using it as energy, ❖

“In some cases, food allergies and sensitivities can lead to water retention, puffy hands feet and ankles – you can pile on as much as ten pounds within a very short space of time”



to storing it as fat. In turn, this shift can cause an increase in body weight and a lack of vitality.'

So it's your body's response that may be causing your weight gain. Unfortunately there's nothing you can do to prevent your body reacting in this way, but you can stop fuelling the problem by avoiding the foods you are sensitive to. If you're not sure what your trigger foods are, get a reliable test done (see your GP for advice).

If you have an allergy, then no amount of advice or treatment (bar desensitisation) will allow you to eat your trigger foods without suffering the consequences. Cyclical allergies, however, can be overcome. Once you've avoided the offending food for a period of time (normally three months) you can usually reintroduce it to your diet and still remain slim – as long as you eat it only in moderation.

Label fables

But what if it's the foods that you're advised to eat that are causing your weight gain? Nutrition advice for people with intolerances and allergies can be lacking when it comes to suggesting substitute foods and it's not surprising that many people find it hard to give up old favourites such as bread and biscuits.

Some experts say supermarkets are cashing in on the rise in allergies by introducing so called 'free from' ranges. Sales of these ranges have boomed by more than 300 per cent in the last five years alone. 'Great' you might say, but if the offending ingredient is missing, what has it been replaced with?

Take bread as an example: as a staple of most people's diets and one food that you don't have to give up thanks to the great alternatives out there. But, an average slice of wheat-free, gluten-free and milk-free bread contains 30 more calories and three grams more fat compared to a slice of regular bread.

Just one sandwich a day could notch up an extra 420 calories over the course of a week and a staggering 42g of fat. Get into the habit of checking labels and don't fall into the trap of thinking that just because it's a 'free from' food it's healthier than the original – while it might sort your symptoms, it could play havoc with your waistline.

'Packaging on Morrisons free/from range features front of pack Guidance Daily Amount (GDA) sign posting, providing at-a-glance information that helps people make informed decisions about the foods they eat,' says Suzanne Laverack, 'free/from' buyer for Morrison Supermarkets. 'This clearly shows customers the nutrition in the product sold versus the GDA.'



An average slice of wheat-free, gluten-free and milk-free bread contains 30 more calories and three grams more fat compared to a slice of regular bread, so read labels carefully



Beat the bloat

One of the most common foods that people exclude – sensitivities or not – is wheat, as it's thought to encourage bloating. 'Digestive problems such as IBS and bloating are often due to the two insoluble proteins found in wheat – gliadens and glutenins – which produce gluten when flour is kneaded with water,' explains Suzi Grant, a nutritional therapist and author of *48 Hours to Kickstart Healthy Weightloss* (£12.99, Penguin). So, how can you keep your tummy flat?



- ✓ Make sure that your diet is rich in fibre, as constipation is a common cause of a bloated stomach
- ✓ As well as avoiding foods you are intolerant or allergic to you might also like to avoid beans, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, sprouts and onions as all are thought to increase bloating
- ✓ Try swapping your usual brew for a cup of chamomile or peppermint tea – both are good for the digestive system
- ✓ Add herbs to your meals to help reduce a distended stomach – dill is an excellent anti-bloater while artichoke is also credited with being a good stomach soother
- ✓ Dehydration can also cause bloating so ensure you are drinking plenty of fluids

