Salicylate sensitivity

Your ENT specialist doctor thinks you may have a sensitivity to salicylates – an ingredient in some foods, medicines and household products. This leaflet outlines what that means and gives some advice on cutting out/down on the things that may be causing your symptoms to find out whether you do have a reaction to salicylates.

What are salicylates?

Salicylic acid (acetylsalicylic acid) is the active ingredient in aspirin. The salts and esters of salicylic acid are known as salicylates, which have a range of actions in the body including anti-inflammatory and pain relief, and may provide some protection from cancer and heart disease. Salicylates occur naturally in many fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices, and are also often used as artificial flavourings and preservatives in skin products, perfumes, toothpaste, sweets and chewing gum, and found in many medications.

Most people can consume normal amounts of salicylates without any problems but some adults and children could have a reduced tolerance to salicylates and products containing aspirin; this is known as salicylate sensitivity. The tolerated amount of salicylates and the type and severity of symptoms will vary from person to person.

How do I know if I have salicylate sensitivity?

Commonly reported symptoms of salicylate sensitivity include:

- Itchy skin
- hives (urticaria)
- rashes
- eczema
- stomach pain
- nausea
- diarrhoea
- headaches
- fatigue
- itchy/watery or swollen eyes
- runny/blocked nose
- sinusitis
- nasal polyps
- wheezing or worsening asthma.

In order to confirm whether your ENT symptoms are being caused by a sensitivity to salicylates your doctor is recommending that you try a **low salicylate diet for at least four weeks** to see if your symptoms improve. This diet sheet provides information on the main sources of salicylate in the diet so that you can cut down or avoid them.

What is a low salicylate diet?

The best way to establish whether or not you are sensitive to salicylates is to avoid all high salicylate foods for four weeks (see the table of the salicylate content of foods on the next page). You should also limit the number of medium salicylate foods you have at any one time as

the cumulative amount of salicylates might also cause a reaction. In addition, you must be careful to avoid medication, supplements, toiletries and cosmetics which contain salicylates (salicylates are easily absorbed through the skin). **After four weeks** if your symptoms have:

- **IMPROVED** – try also limiting medium salicylate foods for an additional 2 weeks to see if there is additional benefit
- **NOT IMPROVED** – it is unlikely that salicylates are causing your symptoms.

What contains high salicylates?

The salicylate content of a food varies depending on factors like plant variety, the soil and climate in which it was grown, degree of ripeness, and the way it was processed or prepared.

The main sources of salicylates in the diet are fruits and vegetables. Levels are highest in unripened fruit, just under the skins, or in the outer leaves of leafy vegetables. Peeling fruit and vegetables and not eating the outer leaves will help to lower the salicylate content.

Products flavoured with mint, menthol and oil of wintergreen also contain a high amount of salicylates (e.g. toothpaste, mouthwash, throat lozenges and chewing gum).

Can I check food/product ingredient lists?

Salicylates are natural components of certain plant foods. Forms of salicylate might be present in a variety of products, but current EU labelling laws do not require them to be listed. In order to identify salicylates in packaged food, medicinal or beauty products, you will need to **check labels for the following ingredients**:

- Aspirin, Ibuprofen, pain relieving drugs
- Acetylsalicylic Acid
- Cold/flu medication
- Magnesium salicylate
- Phenylethyl salicylate
- Menthol
- Mint/spearmint/peppermint
- Salicylate
- Salicylic acid

You can also check with your GP or pharmacist if any medication you take contains salicylates.

Other foods and additives not on the list

Natural flavourings can also contain salicylate, as can herbal remedies, supplements and vitamin and minerals derived from natural plant foods although it is not clear how much salicylate such products may contain. Aloe Vera is often cited as containing salicylate but the salicylate content is currently unknown. For the purposes of the 4 week diet, it is **best to avoid all products containing natural plant extracts**.

Many sources of information also suggest avoiding such additives as benzoates, BHA, BHT and artificial colourings. It is not clear whether these contain salicylate or have a similar chemical structure to salicylate, but for the purposes of the dietary elimination it is probably **best to avoid food and drink with added colouring or flavouring whether it is natural or artificial**.

Salicylate levels in food – Aim for low or no salicylates in your diet

HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW	NO SALICYLATES Can be eaten freely
>0.5mg per portion	0.1-0.5mg per portion	0.01-0.09 mg per portion	
Meat, seafood, milk and eggs			
			Fresh meat, corned beef, game, bacon, fish, shellfish, poultry, eggs, milk, butter, plain yoghurt and cheese
Cereals			
			Barley, buckwheat, arrowroot, oats, rye, rice, wheat, millet, plain breakfast cereals, plain bread, pasta
Fruit per portion e.g. 1 apple, 10 strawberries			
Granny Smith apples, cherries, strawberries	Currants, raisins, kiwi, Gala melon, peaches and nectarines	Golden Delicious apples, banana, blackberries, blueberries, grapefruit, lemon, mango, honeydew melon, orange, pear (peeled), plums, raspberry	Grapes, lime,
Vegetables per portion, e.g. 1 tomato, 5 asparagus spears			
	Asparagus, sweet corn, raw tomatoes, tomato puree	Broccoli, carrot, mange tout, peas, peppers	Aubergine, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, cucumber, green beans, lettuce
Herbs and spices per 1tsp spices, garlic clove, cube of ginger etc.			
Ginger, mixed herbs, mustard, oregano, curry powder	Black pepper, cardamom pods, cinnamon, cumin, fenugreek, mint, nutmeg, paprika, rosemary, thyme, turmeric	Coriander, chilli, fennel, garam massala, garlic, horseradish	
Beverages per portion e.g. glass fruit juice, mug of tea, ½ pint cider			
Coffee, pineapple juice, cider, Benedictine liqueur	Lemon tea, black tea, apple juice, cranberry juice, orange juice, tomato juice, fizzy drinks, Drambui liqueur, wine, rum	Chamomile tea, peppermint tea, grapefruit juice, lager	Gin, vodka
Other			
Liquorice, peppermint (per 100g)	Worcestershire sauce, honey, tomato ketchup (15g sachet)	White wine vinegar	

Managing your salicylate sensitivity

If after completing the four week low salicylates diet you have established that you are sensitive to salicylates, you need to find out what level of salicylate you can tolerate in your diet. You might just need to avoid foods containing very high levels, or you might find that you can only tolerate one or two medium salicylate foods at a meal in addition to avoiding foods containing high levels. Whatever your tolerance, it is important that you eat plenty of the low salicylate fruits, vegetables and pulses in order to maintain a healthy diet. Fruit and vegetables have been shown to have a beneficial effect on health and are protective against cancer, heart disease and diabetes, so aim for at least five portions a day. You may wish to discuss your diet with a dietitian to ensure adequate intake of these foods – ask at your GP's surgery.

If you have asthma, make sure it is well controlled and use your inhaler if foods make you wheezy.

How to contact us

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Based upon the BDA leaflet 'Sensitivity to Salicylates in food' written by Registered Dietitians Isabel Skypala and Rebecca McKenzie.

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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