



When an apple allergy suddenly appears

By Caity Weaver

Imagine this: You take a bite of a crisp fall apple and notice your lips feel a little itchy. An odd sensation, but you ignore it and take another bite. Now your tongue is itchy too. After another bite, the itch spreads to your throat. As you swallow the apple, your throat starts to swell. The weird thing is, you're not allergic to apples; you've eaten them all your life. So what's up?

“I like to call oral allergy syndrome ‘the cocktail party allergy,’” says Dr. Chris Webber, an allergy/immunology specialist based in Denver, Colorado. “It is surprisingly common among people who have seasonal allergies, but (the sufferers) think there's something strange about (themselves) and never bring it up to doctors or friends. But if you bring it up at a social event, you find it is very, very common.”

Oral allergy syndrome (OAS) is a bodily response that occurs in some adult hay fever sufferers when they eat certain raw fruits and vegetables. For the majority of people, its side-effects are annoying but not life-threatening: a temporary itching of the mouth area coupled with a swelling of the throat. The more disturbing aspect is mental: Why are people suddenly allergic to foods they've eaten hundreds of times before?

In fact, it's not specific foods that are the problem: it's pollen. And OAS is just your body being a little over-protective.

Of course, your immune system means well. When you develop a pollen allergy, it's responsible for producing an antibody against that pollen. OAS occurs when your immune system mistakes the food you're eating for the pollen to which you are allergic.

Say you're allergic to birch pollen and eat an apple. Your body might detect trace amounts of pollen left on that apple and start producing antibodies. In one bite, a food you've enjoyed all your life has become an itch-inducing enemy.

Luckily, there are a couple of ways for those affected by OAS to go around the problem and enjoy their food. A common method is to literally go (all) around it, by removing a fruit's outer skin. If that's not sufficient, another tactic has even more dramatic results:

“Heating the foods denatures the fruit's cross reactive protein and renders it nonfunctional,” Dr. Webber explains. In layman's terms: cook it before you eat it, and you're good to go.

Of course, if you suffer from OAS and can't bring yourself to stay away from the raw foods, you can always just wait out the reaction; it typically only lasts about 15 minutes.