

Individuals with food allergies often wonder whether they can safely eat oils made from allergenic foods. Oils from peanuts, soybeans, sunflower seeds, cottonseed, sesame seed, and other commonly and less commonly allergenic foods raise the most questions.

Peanut oil, soybean oil, and sunflower seed oil have been subjected to clinical challenge trials where allergic individuals, including some who were highly allergic, were safely fed these oils. Similar results would likely be obtained with other highly refined edible oils, but it is important to note that other oils have not been tested.

The allergens in peanuts, soybeans, and sunflower seeds are proteins. Edible oils refined by the typical U.S. process contain no detectable protein and are thus free of the allergen. Thus, these oils should be safe for allergic individuals to eat. Salad dressings, margarine, shortening, and other oil-containing products should be safe as long as they do not contain other sources of the allergenic proteins (e.g., other soy ingredients).

Oils should be safe to eat under most circumstances, but it is very important to recognize the exceptions. In food service situations, oils may be used to fry a variety of foods. Thus, peanuts might be included in a product fried in peanut oil, soybeans might be included in a product fried in soybean oil, and so forth. Such practices would be expected to leave protein residues in the oil and in other foods fried in that oil. Such contaminated oils would likely trigger reactions in allergic individuals.

Second, some oil extractions processes may not exclude protein. A cold-press process is occasionally used. While cold-pressed soybean oil was shown safe in the soybean oil trials, this process might occasionally fail to exclude all protein. Insufficient testing has been done to ensure the safety of all cold-pressed oils. Cold-pressed oils are rarely sold in the United States and are usually found only in well-labeled containers in health food or gourmet food stores.

In other countries, other oil extraction processes may be used on occasion. Only oil prepared by the hot-solvent extraction processes that are commonly used in the United States is known to be free of protein. Thus, you should be extra cautious before eating cold-pressed oils and perhaps some foreign-processed oils.

Many allergic consumers are convinced that they react to oils, especially peanut oil. There may be alternative explanations for some of these reactions, such as the use of peanut butter in egg rolls fried in peanut oil in restaurants or the frying of multiple foods in the same oil.

However, if you are convinced that you react to oils, avoidance is an option. Olive oil, canola oil, lard, palm oil, and corn oil should be good alternatives because allergic reactions to the source materials are rare.

Restaurants should be able to identify the oil used in their fryers. However, be cautious - other foods might be fried in these oils. Packaged foods have labels that identify the oils by source, although "either-or" labeling (e.g., either corn or soybean or peanut oil) is allowed in the United States.

In conclusion, oils are usually safe, but caution is necessary especially in food service situations.

Steve L. Taylor, Ph.D., is Professor and Head of the Department of Food Science and Technology at the University of Nebraska, in Lincoln. He is also a member of FAAN's Medical Advisory Board.