



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

### Exposure to nickel has lifelong effects

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Q: My wife is very allergic to nickel from wearing a nickel necklace. Even though she doesn't wear it anymore, the rash often comes back when she exercises. I've been told foods, including breads, contain nickel. Could you list some of the foods that contain nickel?

A: Aside from poison ivy, metal allergy is the most common cause of allergic contact dermatitis, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. The most frequent culprits are nickel, cobalt and chromate; of those, nickel is the primary offender. The prevalence of nickel allergy has soared recently due to the popularity of body piercing, because the most common trigger for nickel allergy is skin exposure to the metal. About 16 percent of people who are patch-tested for allergies test positive for nickel.

Nickel allergy is more common in women because, despite recent changes in fashion, women still wear more jewelry than men. Symptoms usually begin with red, itchy skin and blisters, which may become crusty and scaly. Rashes can recur in the same area, even without repeated exposure to nickel, and may appear elsewhere on the body, sometimes through cross-contamination with nickel residue on the fingers. Sweat may make a reaction more likely.

Once a person is sensitized, the allergy usually persists for a lifetime. Items that may contain nickel include jewelry, belt buckles, watches, clothing fasteners, buttons, eyeglass frames, zippers and jean studs. Even paper clips, pens, scissors, keys, thimbles and cigarette lighters may cause problems. (Note: Here is one more reason to stop smoking. Cigarette smoke contains nickel.)

Experts disagree about whether nickel-sensitive individuals should avoid nickel-containing foods. People with allergies often react very differently to allergens applied to the skin versus taken by mouth. A few small studies have suggested that a low-nickel diet may be helpful, but the concept has not been well tested. Some doctors suggest that their patients with severe nickel allergies try a low-nickel diet for a limited time to see if there is improvement.

Nickel is widespread in foods, including most plant foods and grains. Foods that are especially high in nickel include cocoa and chocolate, soybeans, oatmeal, nuts and almonds, and fresh and dried beans. Nickel is also sometimes found in canned foods. The average American eats about 170 micrograms of nickel a day. Ironically, nickel is thought to be an essential nutrient in humans, although the National Academy of Sciences has not set a recommended daily allowance.

If your wife would like to try a low-nickel diet, I would recommend she speak with her physician allergy specialist and a registered dietitian.

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