

# Jewish health issues

A Jewish Care Interact Guide

## Jewish health issues

A genetic disorder is caused by an abnormality in a person's DNA. These inherited traits get passed along through the cultural tradition of marrying within the same community. As such, Jewish people have passed on mutations in DNA. However, even though Jewish genetic disorders occur more regularly in Jewish people, they are not exclusive to the Jewish population.

New genetic disorders are being discovered all the time, but there are currently 30 well researched and documented genetic disorders prominent within the Jewish population. Some are specific to the Ashkenazic community and others to the Sephardic community.

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### Ashkenazic genetic conditions

According to Jnetics, one in five Ashkenazic Jews is potentially the carrier\* of at least one of the main Jewish genetic disorders. Genetic testing can be carried out to determine whether you are at risk of developing a particular condition or if you are a carrier. Tests may also be done in utero. You can find information about [Screening and tests at jnetics.org](https://www.jnetics.org).

The most common conditions which have a prevalence among Jews of an Ashkenazic background are the following:

**Breast cancer and ovarian cancer.** Breast cancer affects one in nine women in the UK, and 11% of women have a chance of developing the disease. Ovarian cancer is a disease caused by rapid growth and division of cells within one or both ovaries. Ovarian cancer affects one in 70 women in the UK, occurring most frequently in women over 60 years of age. And 5% to 10% of breast and ovarian cancers are known as familial.

Jnetics explains that there are currently two known genes that, when they contain a mutation, cause an increased susceptibility to breast and ovarian cancer. These genes are called BRCA 1 and BRCA 2. BRCA 1 and 2 genes suppress tumours or are genes which regulate cell growth. When tumour suppressor genes no longer function due to mutations, cancer may develop. It is thought that one in 40 Ashkenazic Jews carries a faulty BRCA gene. Go to [Chabad.org](https://www.chabad.org) for more information on [Breast Cancer Genetics and the Jewish Woman](#). Additionally, the [National Hereditary Breast Cancer Helpline](#) has an online forum specifically aimed at the Jewish community.

**Cystic fibrosis.** Cystic fibrosis is a progressive disease which produces a thick, sticky mucus that affects the lungs and digestive system. Other issues involve weight gain, diarrhoea and recurring chest infections. It considerably shortens life span. Cystic fibrosis is one of the most common genetic disorders amongst all Caucasians—not just Jewish people. You can find more on cystic fibrosis by visiting the [Cystic Fibrosis Trust website](#).

**Familial Dysautonomia.** Dysautonomia is a progressive disease that affects the body's involuntary movements and sensory nervous system. Problems occur with the regulation of body temperature and blood pressure, swallowing, tear production, sensitivity to pain and stress response. This disease can influence lifespan. .

**Gaucher disease.** Between one in 10 to 15 Ashkenazic Jews is a carrier of this disease, which is an enzyme storage disorder. This leads to enzyme deficiency and consequently creates an increased

risk of anaemia, low blood platelet counts, tendency to bruise and bleed easily and potential enlargement of the spleen or liver. The [Gauchers Association](#) website has additional information.

**Haemophilia C.** Sometimes referred to as Jewish Haemophilia, Rosenthal syndrome or Factor 11 deficiency, Haemophilia C was first discovered in the Ashkenazic population in the 1950s. The condition affects blood clotting, so people with this disease face the risk of excessive bleeding when they injure themselves, when they menstruate or when being treated during a medical procedure. It is possible to regulate Haemophilia C with medication. The [NHS Choices website has a general overview of Haemophilia](#), and the [Haemophilia Society](#) has additional information.

**Tay-Sachs.** At 10 times the rate of the general population, one in 25 to 30 Ashkenazic Jews is a carrier of Tay-Sachs. Tay-Sachs manifests itself as a rapid degeneration of the brain and nervous system after the age of three to six months. Life expectancy for someone with Tay-Sachs is about four years old. [The NHS Choices site has an overview of Tay-Sachs disease](#) and the [Cure and Action for Tay-Sachs Foundation](#) have additional information.

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## Sephardic genetic conditions

There are five genetic disorders that are common among Sephardic Jews, although their frequency varies based on a person's country of origin. They all stem from single gene mutations found most often in Jews whose families have descended from North Africa, Italy, Iraq or other parts of the Middle East.

**Beta thalassaemia.** This is a name given to a group of inherited blood disorders affecting haemoglobin. For more information, check out the [NHS Choices overview of Thalassaemia](#).

**Familial Mediterranean Fever (FMF).** Also known as Armenian disease, FMF is a hereditary inflammatory disorder which often manifests as a fever. Ninety percent of all patients have their first attacks before they are 18 years old. You can find out more from the [National Genome Research Institute](#).

**G6PD Deficiency.** Also known as favism, G6PD deficiency is the most common human enzyme defect. It is particularly common in people of Mediterranean and African origin. [The G6PD Deficiency Favism Association has more information](#).

**Glycogen storage disease type III (GSD III).** Also known as Cori's disease and Forbes disease, GSD III typically presents itself during infancy by showing up as hypoglycaemia and failure to thrive. The [Association for Glycogen Storage Disease](#) has additional details.

**Wolman's disease.** Also known as early onset lysosomal acid lipase deficiency, Wolman's disease is caused by a deficiency of an enzyme that is necessary to break down certain lipids inside the cells. [WebMD has additional information on Wolman's disease](#).

\*According to the Jnectics site, carrier frequency is the number that describes how many people in a

population are carriers—have one altered copy of a gene and one normal copy of the same gene—for a genetic disorder.

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## Food allergies and intolerances

Food intolerances and allergies are becoming much easier to detect these days. The basic differences between an allergy and an intolerance can be identified in the following ways:

1. A food allergy happens when the body's immune system reacts unusually to a specific food that it mistakenly believes is a threatening substance. The intensity of the reaction varies from person to person, but symptoms can range from mild swellings, rashes or vomiting to extremely serious reactions (such as anaphylaxis, which can be life-threatening). Research shows that food allergies are still pretty rare across the UK (with just 2% of the population being affected). [The NHS choices: Food allergy page has some very helpful information.](#)

2. An intolerance is very different from an allergy, in that symptoms are rarely life-threatening and are far more likely to cause discomfort rather than serious harm. [The NHS choices: Food intolerance page can provide more insight into intolerances.](#)

In order to get the appropriate support, always seek advice from your doctor if you are unsure about your condition.

## Substitutions and suggestions

Once you have an accurate idea of your specific dietary requirements, you can start to think about how to work around them.

Here are some common allergen culprits and smart substitutions.

### Egg

Egg allergies or intolerances are tricky because eggs are a requirement in many recipes, particularly in baking. Eggs can also be found in certain pasta or noodle recipes, but it is not an essential ingredient. When out shopping, make sure to check if egg has been added, and look for other options. They shouldn't be too hard to find.

Thankfully, there are quite a few creative ways around this problem. For example, there are lots of recipes that can be adapted using the following alternatives:

- Banana can be mashed up and used in recipes such as fluffy pancakes or moist brownies. Usually it's safe to substitute one ripe banana for one egg (unless, of course, you have a banana allergy or intolerance too).
- Applesauce is a great replacement for eggs in cakes, muffins or biscuits. One tablespoon of applesauce per egg is recommended.
- Flaxseeds and chia seeds are from the plant which is also the source of linseed oil (one of the plant based oils popular for cooking). If you combine a tablespoon of flaxseeds or chia seeds with three

tablespoons of water, you will get a thick, gelatinous mixture that can be used instead of egg in most baked goods.

- Tofu is an option if you love eggs for breakfast. Crumbled firm tofu, moistened with a little water and seasoned with delicious herbs and spices, can be a fantastic alternative to a traditional omelette or plate of scrambled eggs.
- Chickpea brine (or aquafaba) is a slightly unusual ingredient that actually works as a very effective egg replacer. Next time you drain a can of chickpeas, save the liquid they're preserved in. Next, whip the liquid up until it forms a consistency that resembles egg whites. You can then add the whipped aquafaba to recipes for meringues, chocolate mousse, mayonnaise, cheesecake and much more. TIP: Generally, three tablespoons of unwhipped aquafaba is the equivalent of one whole egg (and two tablespoons of unwhipped aquafaba is the same as one egg white).

## Soy

This is an allergy/intolerance that affects many people, particularly children. When buying products, you should be very careful to check the ingredients; be on the lookout for soy as a base. This is even the case with some dairy options, like yoghurts and spreads. Particularly watch for Asian recipes, as many items (particularly soups and dressings) will include soy too. However, there is now an increasing demand for alternative products, and in most large supermarkets you should find other options that use rice, almond, hemp or coconut.

## Milk and dairy

Did you know that recent research has revealed three quarters of the Jewish population may be lactose intolerant? But don't despair if this is a problem for you.

- Milk replacements are available in several alternatives. Some of the most common are almond milk, oat milk, soya milk or rice milk. All of these are popular, and you may even find that you switch your milk alternatives based on how you are using it. For example, you may enjoy soya milk in your coffee, but prefer to make your morning oatmeal with almond milk.
- Butter can be substituted with non-dairy replacements such as margarine, which can be a perfect substitute for spreading on your toast or using in recipes. If you are frying food, then think about options such as olive oil, sunflower oil or other types of vegetable oil. TIP: Use oil as a base for salad dressings. Try mixing extra virgin olive oil with balsamic vinegar for a tangy salad topping, or perhaps make a classic vinaigrette (all you need is olive oil, vinegar and Dijon mustard).
- Cheese is a little trickier to substitute. If you are looking for something to melt on a pizza or stir through pasta, then there are some options you can buy. These dairy free choices usually have a cashew, soy or coconut base. Many people also enjoy the flavour and texture of an ingredient called nutritional yeast. It might not sound very appetising, but its flavour actually resembles that of parmesan, and it's especially good to sprinkle over your pasta or popcorn!
- Creamy sauces don't have to be a thing of the past if you have a dairy intolerance. When you next make a pasta sauce, try some recipes using ingredients such as tahini paste, finely ground cashew nuts, cannellini beans or chickpeas. Even a bit of ripe avocado can add that velvety texture and creamy taste to your dish.

## Gluten

A gluten intolerance is one of the most common dietary complaints. It is triggered by wheat, rye, barley and several other grains, which means bread, pasta, cereal and even beer can be problematic if you are sensitive to gluten. But there are many alternative gluten-free products that are pretty easy to find these days. For example, try substituting more traditional options with some of the following:

- Pasta and noodles are now available in options made using rice, millet or corn.
- Cereal can be made with corn, oats or rice flakes. TIP: Oats contain a protein called avenin which is similar to gluten, but you may be able to tolerate it even if you have a gluten intolerance or allergy. Be cautious before trying oats as a substitute and seek advice from your doctor if you are unsure.
- Semolina is fairly easy to swap out with polenta, a corn-based grain that can be a great alternative to traditional breadcrumbs. It gets really crispy too!
- Couscous can just be substituted with quinoa instead.
- Bread can be avoided, but sometimes it's easier to just replace it. You can try wrapping sandwich ingredients in lettuce leaves to make a healthy wrap, or bulk out a salad with ingredients like lentils and chickpeas. Replace spaghetti with vegetables and have a go at making courgette spaghetti (you can buy a spiralling machine at quite reasonable prices to make your own vegetarian pasta at home).
- Flour comes in gluten-free varieties, but when baking, you can try substituting conventional flour with other ingredients like almond meal or rice flour.

## Peanuts and tree nuts

Nuts can be replaced in a variety of ways. Lots of dishes and recipes suggest them as an ingredient, and depending on the flavours within the dish, there are several options available.

- Seeds, such as pumpkin or sunflower, can be used as a replacement for nuts in recipes for bread, granola bars, muffins or even as an alternative for making your own spreads (such as traditional peanut butter or other nut butters).
- Pretzels can be crushed up and used as a great topping on ice cream or as a replacement for chopped nuts in other recipes (like biscuits, pies or cheesecake bases). Be careful to check the ingredients if you have any other allergies or intolerances, since pretzels often contain ingredients such as gluten or sesame.
- If you're looking for a replacement for a handful of nuts to be eaten as a snack, think about roasted chickpeas or edamame beans. Pistachios, cashews and walnuts are all great alternatives to peanuts, but take care to avoid any nuts that could trigger a reaction.
- Tahini is a great alternative to peanut butter on toast! Otherwise, try honey or even smashed avocado as a nutritious alternative.
- If you're intolerant to coconut, you can replace coconut milk with alternatives such as almond or cashew milk. Try swapping coconut flakes for other dried fruits like raisins, dried apples or banana flakes.
- Water chestnuts or bamboo shoots can add a lovely crunchy texture to curries and stir fries.

## Alcohol

People can be intolerant to alcohol itself, or otherwise it could be the food used to make the alcohol (for example, the grains used in making whisky). If a recipe asks for alcohol, you could try replacing it with stock (chicken, beef, fish or vegetable). Otherwise, in sweet dishes, milk (dairy or non-dairy) and sugar syrups can be used instead of wine.

If a recipe simply uses alcohol as an additional liquid, you can just replace it with water.

## Nightshade foods

This type of allergy or intolerance includes a specific group of foods such as bell peppers, tomatoes, potatoes and aubergines.

Tomatoes can be a little tricky to avoid since they are used as a base in so many recipes (think of pasta sauces, pizza toppings and soups), but there are some nice alternatives you can try. For example, pesto is a great pasta sauce made with fresh herbs and olive oil. It makes a tasty replacement to traditional tomato based options and can also be used as a pizza base topping. Many restaurants offer pesto pizza or even a white béchamel-style sauce as an interesting swap to typical tomato topping.

If you want to keep chips on the menu, go for a sweet potato! Meaty mushrooms (like portobello or shitake) have a similar texture to aubergine chunks. If you want to find an alternative to a bell pepper with a similar crisp, fresh flavour, try celery or radishes.

## Sesame

Lots of people have an intolerance to sesame, which comes in the form of paste (tahini), oil or seeds (which are frequently sprinkled onto biscuits and other baked goods). In most cases, this ingredient is relatively easy to avoid; however, one staple dish which calls for tahini as a key ingredient is the very popular hummus. Don't worry though, [The Wholesome Dish has great information about how to make Simple Hummus Without Tahini.](#)

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## Making adjustments

Fortunately, there is good practical news for people with special dietary needs. Whether gluten-, nut- or dairy-free, tasty replacements are now plentiful and available. Most of the large supermarkets are even creating specific product lines for people with food sensitivities, so you won't have to miss out on many of the things you love.

There will still be some challenges, but with a few adjustments and substitutions, you should be able to enjoy most of your favourite dishes.

## Find out more

Many magazines and newspapers frequently offer articles with the latest information on food allergies and intolerances. You'll be able to find some really interesting information taken from

recent research into the subject, as well as lots of recipes and inspiration on alternative products to suit various dietary requirements. [To get started, try this article from the Women's Health website: Understanding the 5 most common food allergies and intolerances.](#)

- [Allergy UK has its own YouTube page](#), offering short videos about cooking for specific dietary requirements and advice on how to diagnose allergies.
- [The BBC Food website](#) offers an extensive range of recipes for all kinds of specific diets. Everything from dairy-free, to vegan, nut-free and egg-free can be found on their pages. [The BBC Good Food site](#) focuses on food too, but it also has a helpful [article that looks at the question, Do you have a food intolerance?](#)
- [The Food Standards Agency's Allergy and intolerance page](#) offers great insight into your rights if you have food allergies.

Good luck, and bon appétit!



