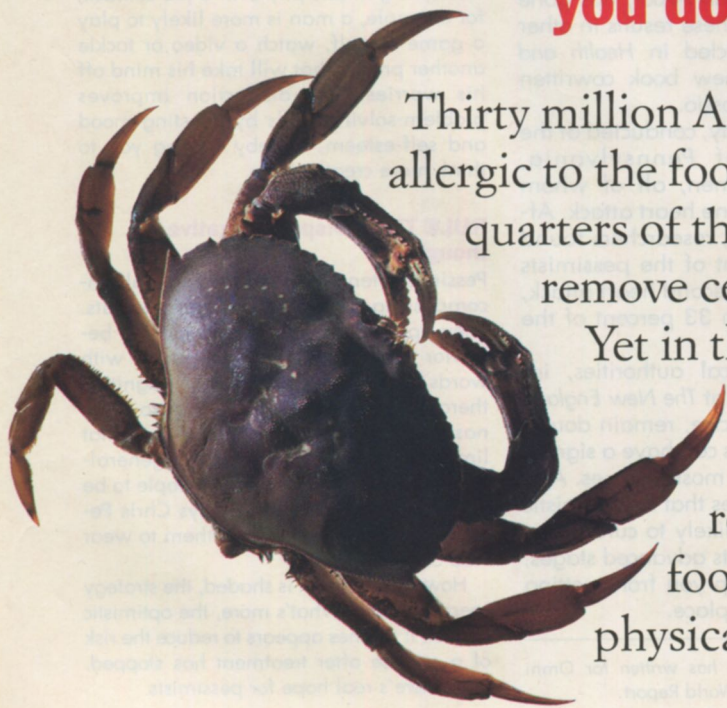


THE ALLERGY



Unless your reaction came from eating peanuts, fish, shellfish, wheat or tree nuts, you don't have a food allergy



Thirty million Americans believe they are allergic to the food they eat. Nearly three quarters of them have gone so far as to remove certain foods from their diets.

Yet in the vast majority of cases, there isn't a shred of scientific evidence demonstrating a relationship between any of the foods and the corresponding physical malady. *BY JOHN SEDGWICK*

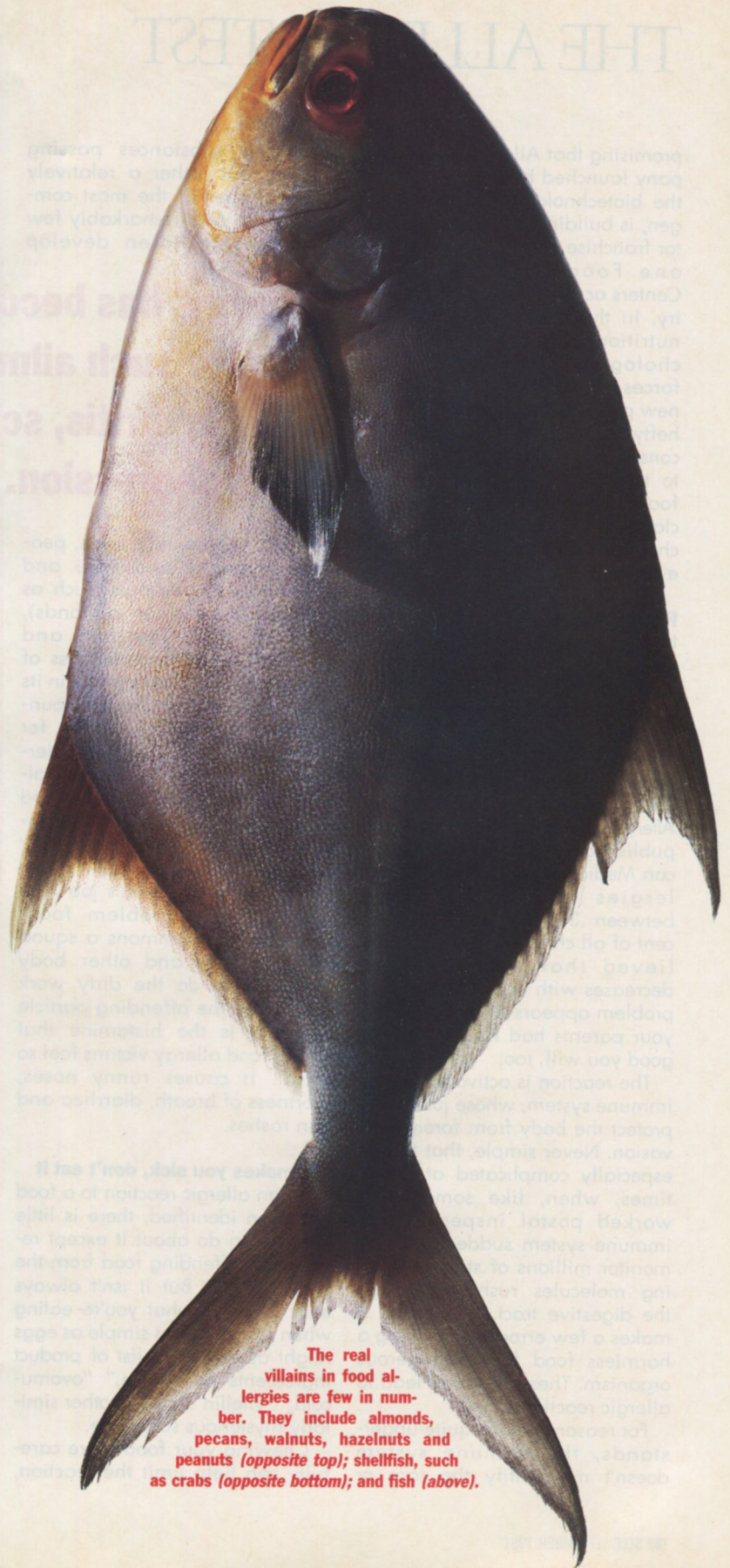
WILLIAM STEELE

TEST

This is not to say that there is no such thing as a food allergy. It is well established that a few of the things we eat—most prominently milk, eggs, nuts and shellfish—can provoke some distinctly unpleasant reactions, ranging from upset stomachs and runny noses to hives and even lethal anaphylactic shock. These allergic reactions are clear-cut and virtually automatic: in goes the offending food, out comes the distressing response.

But over the past fifteen years, food allergy has become a catchall diagnosis for all kinds of nebulous ailments including migraines, hyperactivity in children, arthritis, fatigue, dizzy spells, generalized weakness, increased menstrual pain and even such extreme psychological disorders as manic depression, schizophrenia and other psychoses. The list of adverse reactions is limited only by the imaginations of the people who make their livings treating allergy patients. In their 1980 book *Brain Allergies: The Psychonutrient Connection*, William H. Philpott, M.D., and Dwight K. Kalita, Ph.D., claimed that a well-known yellow fruit drove a twelve-year-old bananas. As they put it, the boy became "listless and depressed" and then "aggressive" after eating a banana. The authors went on to present a kind of fruit salad of amazing food reactions: Pineapples lead to irritability, oranges to anger, watermelons to depression, cantaloupes to antisocial behavior and strawberries to hyperactivity.

As a business proposition, of course, linking so many foods to so many complaints can do wonders for one's client base. After all, everybody eats. In fact, the possibilities for profit are so



The real villains in food allergies are few in number. They include almonds, pecans, walnuts, hazelnuts and peanuts (opposite top); shellfish, such as crabs (opposite bottom); and fish (above).

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promising that Allergx Inc., a company launched by the founder of the biotechnology company Biogen, is building a kind of McDoctor franchise operation of twenty-one Food Allergy Centers across the country. In them, allergists, nutritionists and psychologists will join forces to combat this new plague, charging a hefty \$350 for the initial consultation and \$200 to test each individual food. Other self-proclaimed food allergists charge as much as \$1,000 for an evaluation.

Real food allergies are rare

If Allergx had to rely on scientifically verifiable, strictly defined food allergy sufferers to fill its clinics, it would be hard pressed. Food allergies are a rare condition affecting only a tiny fraction of the population, mostly children. According to the *Primer on Allergic and Immunologic Diseases*, published in 1987 by the American Medical Association, food allergies affect somewhere between .3 percent and 7.5 percent of all children, and "it is believed that the incidence decreases with age." Further, the problem appears to be genetic: If your parents had it, chances are good you will, too.

The reaction is activated by the immune system, whose job it is to protect the body from foreign invasion. Never simple, that task is especially complicated at mealtimes, when, like some overworked postal inspector, the immune system suddenly has to monitor millions of strange-looking molecules rushing through the digestive tract. Inevitably, it makes a few errors—mistaking a harmless food for a dangerous organism. These mistakes lead to allergic reactions.

For reasons no one quite understands, the immune system doesn't misidentify the rare or

outlandish substances passing through, but rather a relatively small number of the most common foods. With remarkably few exceptions, children develop

'Food allergy' has become a catchall diagnosis for such ailments as migraines, arthritis, schizophrenia and manic depression.

reactions only to milk, eggs, peanuts, soybeans and fish; and adults only to tree nuts (such as walnuts, pecans or almonds), peanuts, fish, shellfish and wheat. The very commonness of the food seems to play a role in its provocativeness. In Eastern countries where rice is a staple, for example, it is a frequent allergen. And the reaction doesn't always occur the first time the food is eaten. It generally takes repeated ingestions before your body becomes sensitized.


The immune system's job is to recognize the problem food, whereupon it summons a squad of histamines and other body chemicals to do the dirty work and hustle the offending particle away. It is the histamine that makes food allergy victims feel so awful. It causes runny noses, shortness of breath, diarrhea and skin rashes.

If it makes you sick, don't eat it

Once an allergic reaction to a food has been identified, there is little doctors can do about it except remove the offending food from the patient's diet. But it isn't always easy to know what you're eating when something as simple as eggs might appear on a list of product ingredients as "livitin," "ovomucoid," "vitellin" or some other similarly mysterious substance.

Chewing your food more carefully can help limit the reaction,





according to Neil Orenstein, Ph.D., a nutritional biochemist and coauthor of *Food Allergies: How to Tell if You Have Them; What to Do About Them if You Do*. Supposedly, chewing assists the digestive action of the enzymes in the saliva and the gastric juices in breaking down food particles to the molecular level, a state that allows them to sneak through without being noticed by the immune system.

A sensitivity isn't an allergy

To be sure, there are other food reactions that do not involve the immune system, such as responses to the toxin-producing bacteria in food that has gone bad, hypersensitivity to a widely consumed drug like caffeine or intolerance for milk, which stems from an

forward as examples of "food sensitivities," yet researchers have had "very little success" in proving any connection, according to Hugh Sampson, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. In cases where chocolate has been implicated, for example, it has been either the milk in milk chocolate or the caffeine that has set people off. Even sensitivities that are supposedly well established in the popular wisdom, like the idea that red wine produces headaches, have so far resisted clinical proof.

Still, a food allergy diagnosis might do some good even if it isn't scientifically founded. It can be reassuring for you to hear from a professional that your problems are all in your food. Especially

Most allergies are reactions to a small number of the most common foods rather than to rare or outlandish substances.

enzyme deficiency. Some advocates of a broader interpretation of allergies believe some reactions (to wheat, for example) are real allergies that simply involve biochemical mechanisms different from those known to be involved in the classic reaction. Others prefer to use the more general term *food sensitivity* instead of *allergy*.

But it has been extremely hard to prove the existence of many of the oft-reported vague relationships between foods and symptoms. Chocolate, straw-

An allergy to wheat eliminates many of life's culinary pleasures from your diet: pasta, bread and, alas, pastries.

berries, papaya, tomatoes, corn and a variety of other vegetables have been repeatedly put

since one study of supposed food allergy sufferers showed that the vast majority fit the standard profile of mental health cases. "If a physician spends time with these people, interacts with them and then says, 'You can't eat soybeans, potatoes or chocolate,' lots of times the patients will feel better," says Dr. Sampson. "But their improvement has nothing to do with food."

Over a lifetime, however, such easy answers can prove to be a nuisance—and worse. There have been cases of individuals who gave up so many essential foods in search of elusive health benefits that they starved themselves to death. □

John Sedgwick wrote about new ways to treat chronic pain in the July issue of SELF.