



A Member Asks...
Acorns and Pine Cones
Lynn Christie, M.S., R.D.

“Are acorns and pine cones considered tree nuts? Should someone with a tree nut allergy avoid contact with them?”

There is no information in the literature that suggests that individuals with a nut allergy should avoid skin contact with acorns or pine cones. Some people do experience allergic reactions when they ingest pine nuts, but the pine cone is made up of different proteins, and handling the pine cone should not cause an allergic reaction.

Pine nuts, also referred to as pignoli or piñones, are found in some pine cones. Pine nuts are very difficult to harvest, hence the higher-end cost. Most of the pine nuts in the grocery store are produced in the Mediterranean region. The North American piñon tree was the source of pine nuts for Native Americans and can be found in the southwestern region of the United States.

Acorns are the fruit or nut of the oak tree. Like tree nuts that cause allergic reactions in some individuals, acorns have a hard shell or outer coating, and the “meat” of the nut is inside. Fortunately, we do not use acorns as a part of our diets as the Native Americans did over 400 years ago. The meat of the acorn is very bitter and requires intense labor to make it palatable.

When someone is diagnosed with a tree nut allergy, he or she may be allergic to one or more types of tree nuts. The person is usually counseled to avoid all tree nuts (almond, Brazil nut, cashew, chestnut, hazelnut, macadamia nut, pecan, pine nut, pistachio, walnut, and others). This is because of the difficulty in determining if one type of nut is substituted for another in a recipe, the likelihood of cross-contact during processing or shipping, and the possibility of cross-reactivity. These situations put one at risk for accidental ingestion.

If one has skin contact with the meat of the specific tree nut to which he or she is allergic, one may experience hives or contact dermatitis. This is very individualized. There have been no scientific papers or case reports of allergic reactions associated with skin exposure to acorns or pine cones. Based on consultations with my peers, we comfortably recommend that people with a nut allergy should be able to have contact with acorns or pine cones without risk of an allergic reaction.

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