A food label is actually a legal document in which the manufacturer is obligated to state exactly—down to minute trace ingredients—what is inside the package. Read the ingredients list carefully for foods that you know might cause allergic reaction, or ingredients to which you are sensitive or intolerant.

BOSTON – Fresh vegetables, whole grains, and fish are high on every nutritionist's list, but even these good foods can make you sick, according to a new Special Health Report from Harvard Medical School.

Otherwise healthy foods can carry contamination, trigger an allergic reaction, awaken a food sensitivity, or cause intolerance. A bacterial infection can masquerade as the stomach flu. That sudden skin rash could be a reaction to the gluten in your bread. A bumpy case of hives could have been caused by last night's strawberries or shrimp.

Harvard's new Special Health Report *Food Allergy, Intolerance, and Sensitivity* is designed to help you wade through the minefield of food-related illness.

7 steps to safer eating

A few simple practices can help ensure that the foods you eat will be enjoyable and good for you.

1. Scrutinize labels

A food label is actually a legal document in which the manufacturer is obligated to state exactly—down to minute trace ingredients—what is inside the package. Read the ingredients list carefully for foods that you know might cause allergic reaction, or ingredients to which you are sensitive or intolerant.

2. Divide and conquer

Separating foods in the shopping cart and refrigerator and during cooking is one of the best ways to avoid developing foodborne diseases or triggering allergic attacks and celiac disease. Don't let fish, poultry, or meat come in contact with produce or packaged foods until they reach the plate.

3. Raise – and lower – the temperature

Install your own refrigerator thermometer and make sure the temperature stays at 41º F or lower. When cooking, poke a meat thermometer into the center of any food to make sure it reaches an internal temperature of 165º, which will ensure that all bacteria are eliminated.

4. Wash up

Wash your hands with soap and water before eating and after going to the bathroom. Also after you walk the dog, clean the cat box, weed the garden, blow your nose, take out the garbage, change diapers, care for a sick person, or after any other activity that increases your exposure to germs.

5. Don't overdo hand sanitizer

Hand sanitizers aren't meant to be used as a substitute for soap and water. Limit your use of antibacterial soaps and household cleaners, as they contribute to the growing problem of bacterial resistance.

6. Go on record

Keep a record of your symptoms and the food you have eaten, particularly if you've had gastrointestinal distress for more than a week or two. Food allergy, celiac disease, lactose intolerance, and foodborne illnesses have many symptoms in common, so an account of what you've eaten, when you ate it, and the symptoms you experienced may help your doctors figure out any food-related problems you may be having.

7. Stay alert

Keep an eye out for food alerts and report any bad reactions you've had at www.foodsafety.gov. This Web site is produced through a collaboration of the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Health and Human Services, the National Institutes of Health, and the White House.

Also in this report:

Gluten-triggered conditions

Health conditions that can be aggravated by foods

When foods interact with drugs

Living with food allergy

Food Allergy, Intolerance, and Sensitivity is available for $18 from Harvard Health Publications, the publishing division of Harvard Medical School. Order it online at
www.health.harvard.edu/FoodAllergy2011
or by calling 877–649–9457 (toll-free).