

SHEA NUT BUTTER DOES NOT POSE A RISK TO TREE NUT- OR PEANUT-ALLERGIC CONSUMERS

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Shea nuts are obtained from the shea tree that is indigenous to many parts of Africa. The shea nut is the seed of the fruit of the shea tree. The fruit portion is typically removed to retrieve the hard-shelled nut. Shea nut is a very oil-rich seed.

When the U.S. Congress passed the Food Allergen Labeling & Consumer Protection Act in 2004, they appropriately designated tree nuts as among the most commonly allergenic foods in the U.S. However, Congress failed to provide a list of tree nuts when they passed this law. Later in October 2006, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration provided a list of tree nuts in an attempt to clarify the uncertainty left by Congress. That list included shea nuts.

Should shea nuts or shea nut products be a concern to consumers with tree nut or peanut allergy?

Certainly, shea nuts are tree nuts. However, shea nuts as such are not eaten in most parts of the world (we are uncertain if they are eaten locally in Africa). The primary article of commerce is shea nut butter, also known as shea nut oil. Shea nut butter is a cold-pressed oil that is refined, bleached, and deodorized. Shea nut butter is used in foods primarily in confectionery products as a cocoa butter substitute. Shea nut butter is also used in various cosmetic applications where the primary exposure would be skin contact. Shea nut oil or shea nut butter is primarily the fat fraction of this nut.

Does shea nut butter posed any risk to tree nut- or peanut-allergic consumers?

An exhaustive search of the worldwide clinical literature provided no evidence to indicate that any allergic reactions have ever been reported to shea nut butter. Allergic reactions to shea nuts have not been described either, although they are not widely eaten.

Recent research indicates that shea nut butter does not contain any detectable protein residues and does not contain detectable residues of proteins from peanut or various known allergenic tree nuts (walnut, almond, pecan, hazelnut). Since allergens are proteins, this research indicates the absence of detectable allergens in shea nut butter.

Thus, refined shea nut butter does not pose any known or likely allergenic risk to consumers including individuals with pre-existing peanut or tree nut allergies. Products containing refined shea butter can be safely used by all consumers.