

THE ALPHA DIET

WHERE'S THE BEEF? NOT HERE. MORE AND MORE EAST COASTERS ARE GOING MEAT-LESS, THANKS TO THE LONE STAR TICK AND ALPHA-GAL — A DREADED, FAST-SPREADING, TICK-BORNE ALLERGY. THE SILVER LINING? PLANT-BASED CUISINE AND MEAT ALTERNATIVES YOU CAN REALLY SINK YOUR TEETH INTO ARE RISING TO NEW HEIGHTS. BY ERICA-LYNN HUBERTY



Just when you thought tick-borne illnesses couldn't get any worse, meet alpha-gal, a nasty food allergy that develops when a lone star tick transmits a sugar molecule prevalent in most mammals — except humans, apes, and monkeys — into your body via a bite. The molecule, Galactose- α -1,3-galactose, or alpha-gal for short, triggers mild to severe reactions after the consumption of mammalian proteins.

In other words: Kiss your favorite burger goodbye, unless you want to be knocked down by incredibly severe abdominal pains, develop full body hives, and possibly, you know, stop breathing.

All of this is not news to the hundreds of Long Islanders who are, sadly, all too familiar with the allergy. Whatever the cause of the proliferation of alpha-gal (a warmer Northeast climate? invasion of nonnative species? pre-zombie apocalypse?), it has become a dietary tipping

point for many families on the East End. The good news is that we now have the know-how, and the recipes, to eat well and safely in the face of this latest development in tick-bite survival.

Alpha-gal is not normally found in fish or birds — or, obviously, vegetables or grains — so anyone who eats along “just poultry and fish, please” lines might not even know they have the condition. Or, if they do get mysterious gastro symptoms from time to time, they might not realize what the cause is.

The amount of animal fat in a given dish seems to come into play.

“A lot of animal proteins are high in fat, and fat delays digestion the longest,” explains Ann Silver, a registered dietitian and nutritionist in Sag Harbor and an assistant professor at Suffolk County Community College. “So the allergic response is not necessarily instant — it can be hours later.” Indeed, many

alpha-gal sufferers say the potentially deadly reaction might not kick off for three or five hours after a meal.

Symptoms include itching palms and feet, with hives often spreading to the midsection; diarrhea, vomiting, and intense abdominal pain (which may be mistaken for kidney or gall stone pain); dangerous swelling in the mouth or throat, and, frequently, a precipitous drop in blood pressure. Put together any two body-system responses, and you have anaphylaxis. It's not fun.

“It's a smart idea for people living out here to have Benadryl on them,” advises Silver, “and to avoid meat in general if you can.” She also suggests clients buy business cards to hand to a chef or waiter, with their allergies listed on them.

It isn't just an allergy to red meat. “Everyone keeps saying ‘red meat,’” Silver says, “as if it's just beef and lamb — but pork, rabbit, and venison can all set



“Duck checks a lot of boxes when red meat is out of the question,” says Jason Weiner of Almond. “It’s versatile and ballsy, like steak.” Here, Almond’s duck breast yakatori with black-bean sauce and wheatberries.

off an alpha-gal reaction.”

So what’s a foodie to do?

Charlotte LaGuardia, a certified nutrition specialist, says she, too, has South Fork clients with alpha-gal. “Together, we work on developing a dietary plan to avoid any foods they react to and incorporate lots of anti-inflammatory fruits and vegetables.”

LaGuardia isn’t alone in noticing that the cultural trend toward veganism is well timed for alpha-gal sufferers. “Across the board,” she says, “people are veering towards a vegan or vegetarian diet. . . . A few popular documentaries on Netflix [have] really pushed the vegan agenda, [and] have had a significant impact on people’s food choices.”

She often recommends what she calls “plant-based eating,” which is different from being a strict vegan or vegetarian. “It promotes the consumption of some animal products like free-range eggs and wild-caught fish. However, the focus of every meal is always on the vegetables.”

LaGuardia’s favorite umami-packed substitutes for meat are mushrooms — think: portabello burger — as well as soaked and sprouted beans and quinoa, both good sources of protein.

Meanwhile, many top chefs are coming up with creative and delicious alternatives, to help hungry customers deal with this ongoing issue.

“We absolutely have folks presenting

as alpha-gal and sharing that with us,” says Jason Weiner of Almond and L&W Market in Bridgehampton.

Interestingly, Weiner notes, “The trend I see is not toward veggie or vegan but towards duck, specifically. Duck checks a lot of boxes when red meat is out of the question. It’s versatile and ballsy, just like a steak. It can stand up to a bunch of seasonings — sweet-and-sour Asiany, street food, soul food — just like pork can. And, happily, if the East End of Long Island were a sovereign nation, duck might very well be our national dish.”

Chef Joe Realmuto of Nick & Toni’s and Rowdy Hall also knows a thing or two about navigating the perils of food allergies: “We do see a lot of this alpha-gal thing lately with our customers,” he reports. In his experience, staff is often alerted to the customer’s condition by a their obvious anxiety: “When ordering food, there is a lot of cross-contamination people worry about, and that’s when we hear them specifically letting us know they have alpha-gal.”

At Rowdy Hall in East Hampton, juicy burgers are a specialty. “We now serve the Impossible burger,” Realmuto says, “and people love it. I have had a customer give me a hug saying, ‘Thank you,’ because they miss the taste of beef so much and Impossible is a great substitute for it.” *

CHARLOTTE LAGUARDIA’S CAULIFLOWER STEAKS WITH CASHEW CREAM

- 2 large heads cauliflower
- 2 T. avocado oil
- 2 lemons, zested and juiced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tsp. sea salt
- ¼ tsp. red pepper flakes
- ¼ cup chopped parsley
- ½ cup toasted pine nuts

For sauce:

- ¾ cup raw cashews
- ½ cup water
- ¼ cup fresh parsley leaves
- 1 T. lemon juice
- 1 T. extra virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp. coconut aminos
- ¼ tsp. sea salt

Heat grill to 350. Remove outer leaves of cauliflower, and cut off stem. Using large knife, trim off the rounded sides. Then cut head into 3 even slices, or “steaks.” In small bowl, mix together avocado oil, garlic, lemon zest, lemon juice. Brush one side of steaks with mixture and sprinkle with half the salt; place this side down on hot grill, then brush and salt other side. Cover grill for 5-6 minutes or until bottom begins to char. Flip and cook covered for another 5 minutes, or until tender. Top with red pepper flakes, pine nuts, and parsley. For cashew cream: Combine all ingredients in blender or food processor. Pulse on high until creamy. Pour over steaks.

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