

LIFESTYLE DOC

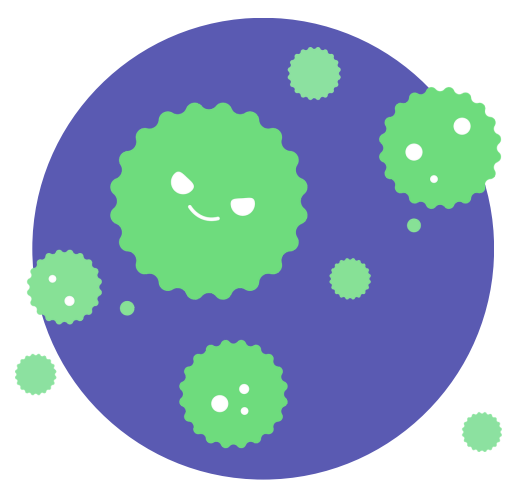


Understanding & Managing Histamine Intolerance

A practical, food-first patient guide to help you break free from histamine-related symptoms naturally



What Is Histamine Intolerance?



Histamine is a natural chemical involved in immune response, digestion, and nerve signalling. Most people clear it efficiently using an enzyme called **diamine oxidase (DAO)**, made mainly in the gut lining.

Think of it as a bucket. Histamine intolerance happens when histamine builds up faster than your body can clear it — the "bucket" overflows. It is not a true food allergy; it is a capacity problem.



Common triggers that lower DAO activity or raise histamine load



Certain medications

Some NSAIDs, long-term antihistamines, some antidepressants/antibiotics



Alcohol

Blocks DAO and is itself high in histamine



Gut conditions

IBD, coeliac disease, SIBO, dysbiosis



Genetics

Some people naturally produce less DAO



Diet

Consistently high in histamine-rich/-releasing foods

Common Symptoms

Symptoms cross multiple body systems and often mimic other conditions — part of why histamine intolerance is under-recognised.



Skin

Flushing, hives, itching, swelling



Head / Neurological

Headaches or migraines, dizziness



Cardiovascular

Palpitations, low blood pressure



Respiratory

Nasal congestion, sneezing, tight chest, wheezing, irritating cough

If this sounds like you, a low-histamine trial alongside your GP’s guidance can help clarify whether histamine is a contributing factor.



Animal Proteins & Cheese



Cured & Smoked Meats

Salami, sausages, other cured or smoked meats



Fish & Seafood

Frozen, salted, smoked, or canned fish (sardines, tuna)



Aged Cheeses

Cheddar, Gruyère, Manchego, Gouda, Parmesan



Fermented Dairy

Yoghurt, sour cream, buttermilk, kefir

Good to know: ageing and fermentation are what raise histamine in dairy — freshness matters more than the food group itself. See the low-histamine dairy swaps ahead.



↓ ↓ ↓ Fermented, Pickled & Vinegar-Based Foods



Fermented Foods

Sourdough, tempeh, miso, soy sauce, natto, sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, all alcohol



Pickled Foods

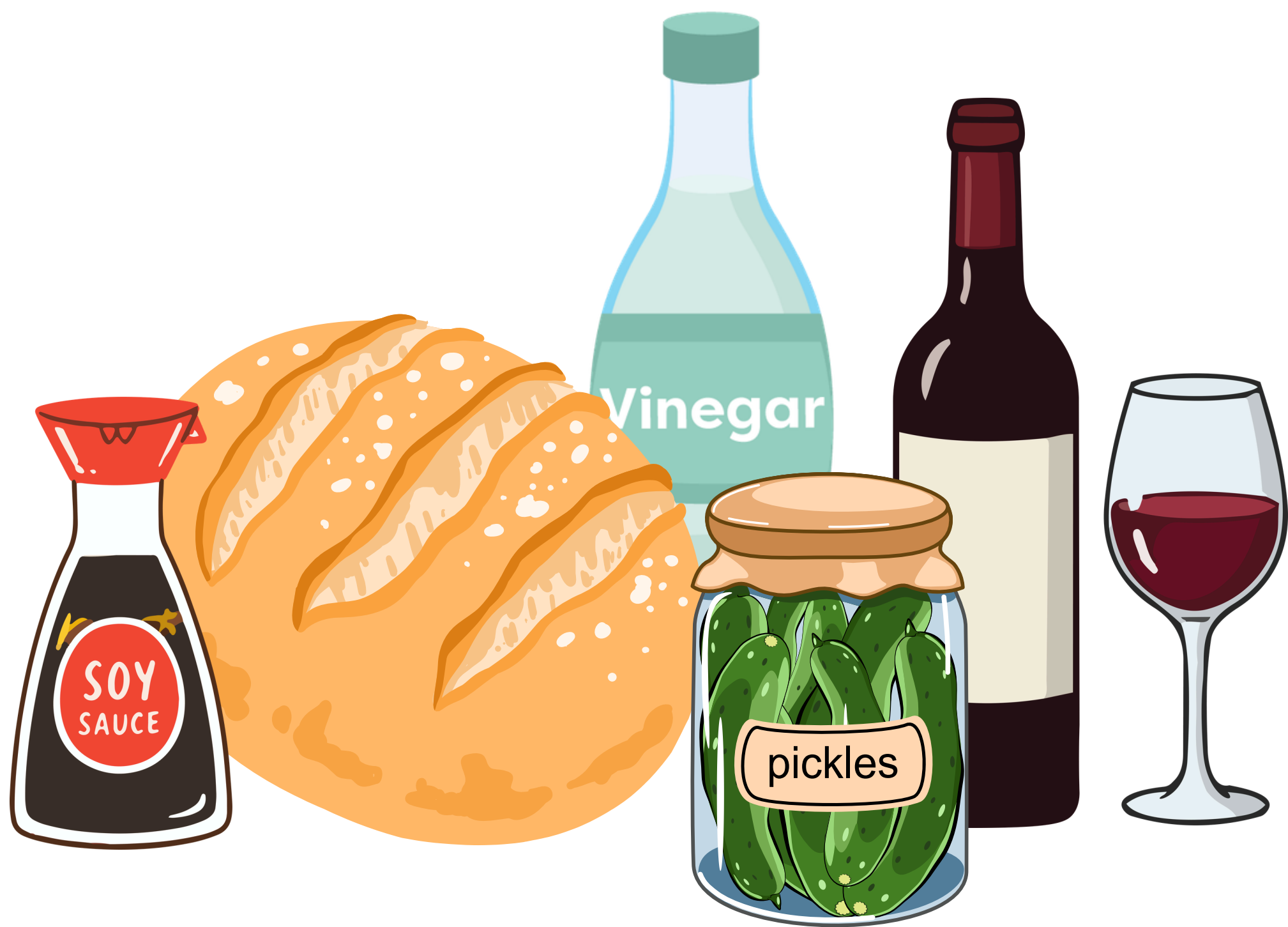
Pickles, pickled vegetables



Vinegars

Vinegar, wine vinegar, soy-based condiments

Also worth minimising: leftovers stored more than 1–2 days — histamine rises the longer food sits, even refrigerated.

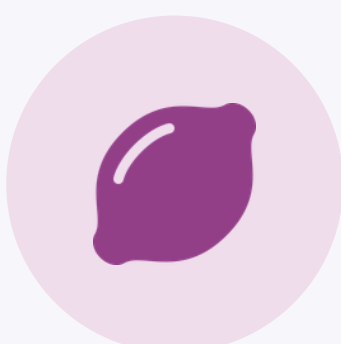


↓↓↓ Nightshades, Citrus & Spinach



Nightshades

Spicy peppers, aubergine, tomatoes, ketchup



Citrus Fruit & Spinach

Oranges, lemons, grapefruit; spinach

Worth knowing: tomatoes, spinach, and citrus aren't necessarily high in histamine themselves — they're better described as "*histamine liberators*," meaning they trigger your own cells to release stored histamine. The practical effect is the same, which is why they're grouped here.

Alcohol: avoid entirely during a low-histamine trial — see the special notes page ahead.



Low-Histamine Dairy Swaps

Freshness is the key factor — the less time dairy has aged or fermented, the lower its histamine content.

INSTEAD OF (HIGHER HISTAMINE)

- Aged cheddar, Parmesan, Gouda
- Yoghurt, kefir, buttermilk



CHOOSE (LOWER HISTAMINE)

- Young Gouda, mozzarella, cottage cheese, cream cheese, ricotta, mascarpone
- Fresh pasteurised milk, butter





Foods Rich In Quercetin, Luteolin & Kaempferol



These flavonoids are natural **mast-cell stabilisers** — they help calm the cells that release histamine in the first place.

AIM FOR 2–3 SERVINGS DAILY

- Dill

Oregano

Onions
- Thyme

Green peppers

Apples
- Capers

Green beans
- Juniper berries



Foods That Support Histamine Breakdown



Fresh poultry and lamb, eaten promptly rather than as leftovers, are especially good low-histamine protein choices.

AIM FOR 1–2 SERVINGS DAILY

- Basil

Rosemary

Broccoli
- Cabbage

Figs

Grapes
- Mangoes

Coconut

Berries
- Egg yolks

Poultry

Lamb

Coffee & Alcohol



Coffee

Caffeine can trigger histamine release in sensitive people, so decaffeinated coffee is generally better tolerated. However, coffee beans undergo a fermentation step during processing — so even decaf may trigger symptoms in some people. Tolerance here is individual, worth testing your own.



Alcohol

Avoid alcohol during a low-histamine trial. It is doubly problematic: most alcoholic drinks — especially wine, champagne, and beer — are themselves high in histamine, and alcohol blocks DAO enzyme activity, raising your histamine load while reducing your ability to clear it.



Practical Everyday Tips



Eat fresh, cook fresh

Histamine rises the longer food sits — cook smaller batches and eat the same day where possible.



Freeze, don't fridge, for storage

Preparing ahead? Freeze portions right after cooking rather than refrigerating leftovers for days.



Read labels

Watch for hidden vinegar, soy sauce, or fermented ingredients in sauces, dressings, and processed foods.



Keep a food-and-symptom diary

One to two weeks of tracking helps identify your personal triggers — tolerance varies a lot between people.



Introduce changes gradually

Rather than eliminating everything at once, ease in — more sustainable and easier to spot what's helping.



Lifestyle Factors That Matter Too

Histamine regulation isn't only about food — these pillars support your body's regulatory capacity.



Stress Management

Stress can influence mast-cell activity and histamine release. Simple daily practices — breathwork, walking, time outdoors — genuinely help.



Sleep

Poor sleep is linked with increased inflammatory and mast-cell activity. Consistent, sufficient sleep supports your body's regulatory capacity.



Gut Health

DAO is produced in the gut lining, so supporting overall gut health — and addressing any underlying gut conditions — is foundational, not an afterthought.



Elimination, Reintroduction & When To Seek Help



1. Eliminate

2–4 weeks on the low-histamine list, focusing on fresh foods, while tracking symptoms.



2. Reintroduce

Once symptoms settle, reintroduce one food group at a time, a few days apart.



3. Personalise

Tolerance is individual and often threshold-based — the goal is your tolerable level, not lifelong strict avoidance.

This should ideally be done with guidance — very restrictive diets long-term can affect nutritional adequacy.



When To Seek Further Support

- Significant or persistent symptoms: discuss testing and a formal work-up with your GP
- A dietitian experienced in histamine intolerance can help keep the diet nutritionally balanced
- DAO enzyme supplements may help some patients — evidence is emerging, so discuss individually



Quick-Reference Cheat Sheet



Generally Well-Tolerated

- Fresh poultry, lamb, eggs
- Fresh pasteurised milk, butter, young cheeses
- Most fresh vegetables & fruit (except those listed)
- Herbs: dill, oregano, thyme, basil, rosemary
- Decaf coffee



Limit Or Avoid

- Cured/smoked/canned meats & fish
- Aged cheeses, fermented dairy
- Tomatoes, aubergine, spinach, citrus, spicy peppers
- Vinegar, soy sauce, pickles
- Alcohol, fermented foods, leftovers > 1–2 days



You don't have to live on high alert

A low-histamine approach, paired with attention to stress, sleep, and gut health, can meaningfully reduce symptoms for many people — and there are no harmful side-effects.

NEXT STEPS

1. Read the full patient story on the Lifestyle Doc blog
2. Try this guide for 2–4 weeks and track your symptoms
3. If symptoms don't settle significantly, consult your doctor for further investigation



Know Someone Who Needs This?

If a friend or family member struggles with unexplained rashes, flushing, or allergic-type symptoms, please share this guide — or the full blog post — with them. It might be exactly what they need.

Dr Karen Hartzenberg · Lifestyle Doc · lifestyledoc.co.za

*This guide is for educational purposes and does not replace personalised medical advice.
Please consult your doctor before changing any medication.*

