

## Paediatric allergy

# Food challenge - what you need to know

## Information for patients, relatives, and carers

### Introduction

Food challenges are tests performed in hospital to see if your child is allergic to or able to eat a particular food. This leaflet explains what to expect when your child has a food challenge. Please contact the paediatric allergy team using the details on page 4 if you have any questions or concerns.

**If you decide to go ahead with the challenge, you must book it by calling 020 3311 6611.**

### What is a food challenge?

A food challenge is when your child is fed a certain food under close medical supervision, as there is some risk of them being allergic to it. It starts with a very small amount of the food and then gradually gives bigger doses (usually every 20 minutes), until a reaction occurs, or the 'top dose' is eaten without any allergic reaction. The 'top dose' is generally a normal portion for your child's age. A food challenge usually lasts between 3 to 6 hours, most commonly around 5 hours.

### What are the benefits of having a food challenge?

A food challenge will confirm whether your child has a food allergy to the food tested or not. If your child passes the challenge without a reaction, we advise you to introduce the food into their diet regularly, generally on a weekly basis. This may help you and your family to lead a more normal life, with fewer dietary restrictions and without fear of your child reacting to that specific food. If your child reacts at the challenge, they will need to continue to avoid that food and this information should be passed on to their school or nursery. Some parents and children have expressed that going through a reaction at a food challenge has helped them to better understand and manage their allergies.

### What are the possible risks?

There is a potential risk of your child having an allergic reaction to the food tested. This is why the test is done in hospital and not at home. An allergy clinical nurse specialist will carefully monitor them and check for any signs of allergic reaction. A doctor will always be available if needed. If your child experiences an allergic reaction during the challenge, they should stop eating the food immediately. Medicine(s) will be given to relieve any significant symptoms and to stop the reaction from getting worse – this may be an antihistamine such as cetirizine or, in the case of a more severe reaction affecting their airway, breathing or consciousness/circulation, an adrenaline auto-injector (Epipen®, Jext® or Emerade®).

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## Why has my child been advised to have a food challenge?

This is usually because your child's chances of tolerating the food are high (based on their history and test results) and introducing that food into their diet may help to make their life easier. Your child may grow out of an allergy and a food challenge is the safest and most certain way to find out whether your child has a food allergy or not.

Please take your time to decide whether you would like your child to have the food challenge test. If you feel your child might be very reluctant to try the food on the challenge day, or afterwards on a regular basis, then please try and discuss this with them before coming into hospital.

## What are the alternatives to having a food challenge?

You may choose for your child not to have a food challenge and just continue to avoid the food they might be allergic to.

## What should I do to prepare my child for the food challenge?

### Explaining the hospital visit to your child

Preparing your child for their hospital visit will help them understand what is happening and can improve your child's willingness to cooperate on the day. Talking to your child beforehand will give them time to ask any questions they may have. Always give them truthful, factual information. You may wish to bring some familiar toys or books on the day to help your child feel at ease.

### Food

Your child can eat a light snack and drink during the challenge. We will also ask your child to have lunch or a snack once the challenge is completed, **so please bring a packed lunch**. Alternatively, you can order a menu on our unit on the day. We will provide the food for your child's challenge, but it is also a good idea to bring other foods they like, so that we can use it to disguise the taste of the food being challenged, if needed. You will need to stay with your child at all times during the challenge, so you may also want to bring some food for yourself too. **Please note** If your child is having a food challenge to baked egg or baked milk (e.g., muffin), we will have given you a recipe to back some muffins yourself and bring them in on the day.

### Illness and medications

**Your child must be well with no cough, cold or recent infections for at least one to two weeks before the challenge.** If they have asthma or eczema this must be well controlled and stable. **Please complete the checklist at the end of this leaflet to make sure your child can have the test.**

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If your child is taking medications, please follow these instructions:

**Antihistamines:** Your child may be taking a regular antihistamine such as chlorphenamine, cetirizine or loratadine (Piriton®, Zirtek® or Clarityn®). **These will need to be stopped five days before the challenge.** Please note that some cough medicines will also contain antihistamine (e.g. Tixylix®). If your child has hay fever and struggles to stop antihistamines in Spring or Summer, you may wish to book any food challenges in the Winter.

**Asthma medication:** Your child should continue to take their regular preventative asthma inhalers (usually brown, orange or purple). If your child is wheezy, coughing or has needed their asthma reliever (usually blue) inhaler (salbutamol (Ventolin®) or terbutaline (Bricanyl®) more often than usual in the two weeks before the challenge, please contact the allergy team on **020 3312 1381** before the challenge day to discuss this further.

Please bring your child's allergy medications with you on the challenge day, including the adrenaline auto-injector(s), if they have any.

### Other practicalities

When booking the time of your challenge, please consider your child's daily routines, particularly sleep routines in young children. Long naps during the first 2-3 hours of a food challenge cannot be accommodated, and the challenge will need to be rescheduled for a later date. In the 2 hours observation after having the top dose, children can sleep. Short 20min naps can be accommodated in between doses during the challenge.

**Please note** Only one parent / guardian is allowed to stay with the child during the challenge, as we have limited space. For children or parents who require additional people to attend, for instance due to special needs, we will do our best to support this, as space is limited, please let us know when booking the challenge so we can accommodate.

You will be asked to remain in the Paediatric Allergy Day Unit for the duration of the challenge. For safety reasons, only the tested food, soft drinks, water and agreed food for masking purposes for your child will be allowed in the room. Hot drinks are not allowed. For the last 2 hours of observation, you can stay in the waiting area outside the Paediatric Allergy Day Unit, where you and your child will be able to have lunch.

## What will happen on the challenge day?

### Punctuality

Please **arrive on time** for your appointment. Arriving late may lead to the challenge not going ahead for safety reasons, as a nurse is allocated to each challenge timeslot, and this may be compromised. On arrival, come to the reception area in the Paediatric Allergy Day Unit. An allergy nurse will explain the challenge in detail and answer any questions you or your child may have. We will also indicate useful facilities within the Unit, such as toilets and changing facilities.

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## Consent

We will ask you to sign a **consent form** on behalf of your child (so the **person attending the appointment** with your child **must be the parent or legal guardian**) unless consent has already been taken in clinic. The nurse will then ensure your child is fit and well to have the challenge, and take their temperature, blood pressure and oxygen levels. These will be repeated during the test.

## Food doses

Your child will then receive increasing doses of the food tested every 20 minutes (usually up to a normal portion size for their age). The total number of doses may vary between 2 and 7, depending on your child's background history and test results. Once the top dose has been reached, we also need to wait and observe your child for a further two hours. If your child eats with their fingers or get their face dirty with the food, please wash with soap and water.

## Allergic reactions

Most children having a food challenge will not have an allergic reaction to the food tested. Some children develop mild or subjective symptoms due to worry about eating a food they have been avoiding before. These often ease as the challenge progresses and children may be able to complete the challenge successfully. Our team will closely monitor and support your child if they are experiencing any symptoms.

If your child has an allergic reaction, it will be managed as per the national BSACI allergy action plan and no more doses of the tested food will be given. For mild-moderate allergic reactions affecting your child's skin, gut, nose or eyes, we will give an oral antihistamine (e.g. cetirizine). For a reaction affecting your child's airway, breathing or consciousness/circulation (i.e. anaphylaxis), intramuscular adrenaline will be given using an adrenaline auto-injector (e.g. EpiPen, Jext or Emerade) as the initial treatment. If an adrenaline auto-injector needs to be given to your child, we will offer you (or your child, if old enough) the option to do this with direct support from the team. Further treatment may be required as advised by the medical team.

If your child has an allergic reaction at the challenge, they will need to be observed for at least two hours before they can go home. Rarely, in the unlikely event of a serious reaction, your child might need to stay overnight in hospital.

## What will happen after the challenge day?

The nurse will tell you the outcome of the challenge and provide advice accordingly. After a negative (successful) challenge with no reaction, we advise you to introduce the food into your child's diet on a regular basis. After a positive (unsuccessful) challenge leading to an allergic reaction, you should avoid the food. The nurse may go through your child's allergy action plans with you to ensure you feel comfortable with the management of allergic reactions. We will arrange appropriate follow-up in the allergy clinic if needed.

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## Who can I contact for queries or questions?

If you have any questions about the challenge, or difficulties reading English, please call the allergy team on **020 3312 1381**. Please note that this number is not for urgent healthcare queries. For urgent queries contact 999 (for emergencies), 111 (for non-emergencies) or your GP, as appropriate. Please see the table below for other useful contact numbers.

**Paediatric allergy nurses** (for allergy-related health queries) **020 33121381**

**Paediatric allergy dietitians** (for diet-related queries) **020 3312 1127**

**Admin teams:** (for appointment-related queries)

- Food/drug challenge appointments booking **020 3311 6611**
- Main reception (paediatric allergy, St Mary's Hospital) **020 3312 1381**
- Outpatients department appointments (St Mary's Hospital) **020 3312 6315**
- Outpatients department appointments (Hammersmith Hospital) **020 3313 4727**

**Paediatric allergy secretaries** (for letters/reports) **020 3312 1257**

## How do I book the food challenge if I wish to go ahead?

**If you and your child are happy to go ahead, please phone the booking team on 020 3311 6611 within 21 days of your last visit.** You will need to say which food they will try in hospital. If you do not phone to book the challenge, you will receive a reminder letter by post. If you do not phone to book within 28 days of your visit, you will no longer be able to book the challenge.

If you need to cancel a challenge that has been booked, please contact **020 3311 6611**. If you do not attend on the challenge day, please contact the number above as soon as possible. Otherwise, you will not be able to rebook the challenge.

## Pre-challenge checklist

Please complete the checklist the day before the food challenge and bring it with you on the day.

Pre-challenge checklist	Yes	No
My child* and I understand why the test has been advised		
My child* and I understand the benefits and risks of the test		
My child* and I are happy to go ahead with the test		
My child is happy to eat the food on the challenge day, and if tolerated, on a regular basis thereafter		
My child has avoided any antihistamines for five days before the challenge		
My child has been well in the two weeks before the challenge (e.g. they have not had any fever, a cold, a sore throat, tummy bug or a flare of their asthma, hay fever or eczema)		

<b>What to bring on the day of the appointment (tick checklist)</b>	
My child's emergency allergy medications (including their adrenaline pens, if they have them, their inhalers and antihistamine)	
A bottle of water or still juice/squash (so your child stays hydrated)	
An appropriate light meal for your child to eat after the food challenge (this must be a food you know your child eats and tolerates) – Please note we cannot heat food for you.	
If trying baked egg or baked milk, I have baked the muffins and will bring them on the day (you will have been provided with the recipe before the appointment)	
A food/condiment to "hide" the taste of the test food if you suspect this will be needed (this must be a food you know your child eats and tolerates)	
A change of clothes (for children under 5 years old)	
Any special foods you may have been asked to bring for skin testing if this has been agreed in advance.	

\*(if old enough)

## How do I make a comment about my visit?

If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith, and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at **imperial.pals@nhs.net**. Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in **writing** to: Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street, London W2 1NY.

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team: **imperial.patient.information@nhs.net**