

Paediatric allergy

Food challenge – what you need to know

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

Food challenges are tests that are performed in hospital to see if you or your child is allergic to or able to eat a particular food. This leaflet explains what to expect when you or your child has a food challenge. Please note if you are a child or young person reading this information, when we say 'your child' we mean you.

Important:

- a food challenge lasts for at least four hours, including observation – you and your child will need to stay in the hospital for the whole food challenge
- if you decide to do the food challenge, you need to book by ringing **020 3311 6611**
- you need to complete the pre-challenge checklist at the end of the leaflet and bring it with you to the hospital on the day of the food challenge

What is a food challenge?

A food challenge is when your child is fed a certain food under medical supervision, as there is uncertainty whether or not they are allergic to it. It starts with your child eating a small amount of the food, then gradually bigger amounts, usually every 20 minutes. We stop when they have a reaction or they eat the 'top dose' without any allergic reaction. The 'top dose' is usually a normal portion for your child's age.

What are the benefits of doing a food challenge?

A food challenge will confirm whether your child has a food allergy or not. If your child tolerates the food challenge, meaning they are **not allergic**, you should include the food in their diet at home, as desired. This might 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, meaning they are **allergic**, they will need to continue to avoid that food and you need to tell their school or nursery. Some parents, children and young people have said that having a reaction during a food challenge has helped them to better understand and manage their allergies.

What are the possible risks?

There is a chance of your child having an allergic reaction to the food. This is why we do the test in hospital and not at home. An allergy clinical nurse specialist will carefully

monitor your child and check for any signs of allergic reaction. A doctor will also be available if your child needs one. If your child has an allergic reaction during the challenge, they should stop eating the food. We will give them medicine to relieve any symptoms – this might be an antihistamine such as cetirizine or, in the case of a more severe reaction, adrenaline auto-injector (Epipen® or Jext®).

Immediate risks (during or shortly after the food challenge)

Common

More than 1 in 20



Allergic reaction

An allergic reaction is when the immune system reacts to a particular drug, substance, or food.

In most cases a reaction is mild, causing symptoms like itchiness and redness or stomach upset. This happens in more than 1 in 20 food challenges. Occasionally reactions can be more severe and cause breathing difficulty or wheezing, which we call anaphylaxis. This happens in less than 1 in 20 cases.

Inconclusive result

An inconclusive result is when the result of the investigation or procedure is unclear and doesn't give us a definite answer. Sometimes further investigations are then needed to get a clearer outcome.

This can happen if your child has difficulty eating the food or if they have symptoms that are not typical of an allergic reaction. In this case, we will give you appropriate advice and talk to you about alternative tests. This happens in more than 1 in 20 cases.

Less common

Fewer than 1 in 20



Further treatment needed

Your child might need more treatment based on the outcome or findings of the procedure, or from complications of the procedure.

If your child has an allergic reaction during the food challenge, we might give them antihistamines (for a moderate reaction). If your child has a more severe reaction, such as anaphylaxis, we might give them an adrenaline injection. This happens in less than 1 in 20 cases. If we give your child these medications, you will stay for a longer period of observation or, in rare cases, need to stay overnight.

Very rarely, in around four in one million allergic reactions, a reaction is life-threatening, and a child may need to be admitted to Intensive Care.

Early risks (in the days after the food challenge)

Less common

Fewer than 1 in 20



Delayed allergic reaction

Uncommonly, a delayed allergic reaction can happen hours to days after exposure. This happens in less than 1 in 20 cases. These symptoms may include loose poo or diarrhea, abdominal pain or a flare of eczema symptoms.

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

This is usually because your child has a significant chance of being able to tolerate the food (based on their previous diet, allergies and test results). Introducing this food into their diet may help to make their life easier.

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, then please try and talk to them about this before booking the challenge or coming into hospital.

What are the alternatives to having a food challenge?

You can choose for your child not to have a food challenge and continue to avoid this food. Your allergy team might recommend trying the food at home. Your child might grow out of an allergy but a food challenge in hospital is one of the safest and most certain ways to find out whether they have a food allergy or not.

What should we do to prepare for the food challenge?

Talk to them beforehand and give them a chance to ask questions. This will help them understand what will help and might mean they follow instructions better on the day. Tell them the truth about what's going to happen. It is generally helpful to bring some familiar toys or books on the day to help your child feel at ease and keep them entertained.

Bring a packed lunch. Your child can eat a light snack and drink during the challenge, and also have lunch once the challenge is completed. 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.

For many of the oral food challenges the food is provided by the hospital (e.g. peanuts, tree nuts, cooked egg, raw egg, fresh milk, soya milk). However, we might ask you to bring your challenge food (e.g. baked milk muffin, baked egg muffin, fruit, vegetable). We will tell you if you need to do this. It is also a good idea to bring other foods they like, so that we can use it to hide the taste of the food being challenged, if needed.

Please note: If your child is having a food challenge to baked egg or baked milk (e.g. muffin), we will give you a recipe and ask you to bake the muffins at home. You need to follow the recipe carefully. You will then need to bring the muffins with you on the day of your child's food challenge.

Your child must be well with no cough, cold or recent infections for at least one week

before the challenge. If they have asthma or eczema this must be well controlled and stable.

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

- **Antihistamines:** If your child is taking a regular antihistamine such as chlorphenamine, cetirizine or loratadine (Piriton®, Zirtek® or Clarityn®), **they will need to stop five days before the challenge.** Please note that some cough medicines will also contain antihistamine (e.g. Tixylix®).
- **Asthma medication:** Your child should continue to take their regular preventative asthma inhalers (usually brown, orange, purple or white). Blue inhalers (salbutamol (Ventolin®) or terbutaline (Bricanyl®); if your child is wheezy, coughing or has needed their blue inhaler more often than usual in the week before the challenge, please ring 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 their adrenaline auto-injector(s), if they have any. **Please complete the checklist at the end of this leaflet to make sure your child can have the test.**

Please note only one parent / guardian is allowed to stay with the child during the challenge, as we have limited space.

What will happen on the challenge day?

On arrival, we will explain the challenge in detail and answer any questions you or your child have. 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). The nurse will then make sure your child is fit and well to have the challenge, and take their temperature, blood pressure and oxygen levels. They will repeat these tests during the challenge.

Your child will then receive increasing doses of the challenge food every 20 minutes (up to a normal portion size for their age). We usually give 5 increasing doses. We also need to wait and observe your child for two more hours. If your child has an allergic reaction before the final dose, then we won't give them anymore doses. We will treat the reaction and observe your child for two to four 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 give you some advice. After a tolerant (NOT allergic) challenge, we advise you to introduce the food into your child's diet on a regular basis. After an allergic (reactive) challenge, you should avoid the food. The nurse can go through your child's allergy action plans with you to make sure you feel comfortable with how to manage allergic reactions. We will arrange follow-up appointments at the allergy clinic if needed.

Who can I contact for queries or questions?

If you have any questions about the challenge please ring the allergy team on **020 3312 1381**. The recording will ask you to leave a voice message and the allergy team will get back to you within two to three working days.

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.

Other useful contact numbers:

Paediatric allergy team (for allergy-related health queries): **020 3312 1381**

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.

If you've booked a food challenge and need to cancel it, please contact **020 3311 6611**. If you need to cancel on the day of your appointment, please contact the number above as soon as possible. If you don't tell us and don't arrive, you will not be able to rebook the challenge.

Pre-challenge checklist

Please complete this checklist the day before the food challenge and bring it with you on the day. If your answer to any of the items below is 'no' or 'not true', please ring us on **020 3311 6611** as soon as possible as we may not be able to do the challenge.

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* and I understand that the challenge test takes at least 4 hours		
My child is happy to eat the food on the challenge day, as far as I am aware		
My child has not taken any antihistamines for five days before the challenge		

My child has not been unwell in the week before the challenge (e.g. with fever, a cold, a sore throat, tummy bug or a flare of their asthma, hay fever exacerbation or eczema flare)		
I'll bring my child's allergy medications on the day (including adrenaline autoinjector(s), if they have any)		
If my child is having a food challenge to baked egg or baked milk, I have baked the muffins using the recipe provided and will bring them on the day		
I am bringing a packed lunch and snacks for me and my child, including (where appropriate) a food to mix or spread the challenge food with in case they prefer to eat it that way		
I am bringing toys or books as appropriate to keep my child entertained		

*(if old enough)

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. 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 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

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.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk