Food challenges
Information for parents and carers
Food challenges

An appointment has been made for your child to have a food challenge. The following information should help you to prepare yourself and your child for coming into hospital for the challenge. It also gives details of what to bring with you on the day.

Why do we carry out food challenges?

Food challenges are carried out:
• when we need to find out whether a food, medicine or other product is causing your child to have an allergic reaction or
• to confirm whether your child has outgrown a previously confirmed allergy.

If your child does have an allergy, they may be at risk of a severe reaction when eating (or sometimes touching) the food, medicine or product (such as latex) that they are allergic to. This severe reaction is known as anaphylaxis and requires immediate treatment with a drug called adrenaline. This is the drug which is in the Epipen.

If your child is thought to be allergic to a certain food, you will be advised to avoid including that food in their diet. However, eliminating foods from a child’s diet whilst at the same time making sure they have a healthy and balanced diet can be complicated. Your child may also not be happy to have to leave out certain foods, especially if they are favourite foods or treats.

However, over time some children outgrow their allergies, and may be able to tolerate the food or medicine that was previously causing them to have an allergic reaction.
Before the challenge your child will have seen an allergy consultant in Outpatients; they will have had some basic tests including skin prick tests and blood tests. The results of these tests, combined with your child’s history, will have shown that performing a food challenge in hospital under controlled conditions is the safest way to find out if your child is as allergic to a food or medicine as they were before.

What are the benefits?

The benefit of a food challenge is that it will tell us whether your child is allergic to a food or medicine in a setting where we can control how much they are exposed to the substance, and be ready to treat them if they have an allergic reaction.

What are the risks?

When performing a food challenge, there is a risk that your child might have a reaction. Children are carefully selected for challenges so that the risk of reaction is low, but about 1 in 10 children have a minor reaction, for example lip or eye swelling, or a rash. There is a rare risk of anaphylaxis which is why the challenge is done under controlled conditions. There will be full paediatric and resuscitation back-up available, if needed.

Occasionally, a challenge is offered to a child who is thought to be at higher risk of reacting, in order to confirm a diagnosis. If this applies to your child we will tell you at the time of referral.

Consent

We will ask for your written consent for the food challenge to go ahead. If there is anything you are unsure about, or if you have any questions, please ask the doctor or Nurse Practitioner before signing the consent form.
How to prepare for the food challenge

It is important to stop all antihistamines before the challenge as these may cause a misleading result.

Please stop:

- Piriton (chlorpheniramine), Phenergan and Vallergan **48 hours** before the challenge
- Zirtek (cetirizine), Clarityn (loratadine) **one week** before the challenge

Your child’s challenge will be cancelled if they have taken any of these medicines after these times.

However, if your child has a reaction during this time please give them antihistamines as you normally would. Please let us know if this happens and we will rearrange the challenge.

Your child needs to be fit and well to undergo the challenge. If they are unwell in the days leading up to the food challenge, please contact the ward and we will let you know whether you should still come in.

On the morning of the challenge please give your child their usual breakfast. You will need to arrive on the ward by 8.30am.

What does the challenge involve?

Before the challenge begins your child will be seen by a nurse, doctor or Nurse Practitioner, and Play Specialist. Their nurse will complete some admission paperwork, check your child’s weight and take some basic observations (such as their heart rate, blood pressure and temperature). The doctor or Nurse Practitioner will then check your child is fit and healthy and discuss their medical history. They will then explain the procedure and ask you to sign the consent form to say you are happy to go ahead.
Some children need to have a cannula inserted before the challenge begins. This is a thin plastic tube that is placed under the skin, usually on the back of the hand. This decision will be made by the allergist who has referred your child and depends upon your child’s past allergic reactions and medical history. If a cannula is needed your child will have some local anaesthetic cream (Emla or Ametop, sometimes known as ‘magic cream’) placed on their hand or arm beforehand, so it does not hurt as much. It works well for 9 out of 10 children. The Play Specialist is there to help your child if they are worried.

The challenge will then start, following a set schedule. The food or medicine will be given to your child in small amounts, gradually increasing until they have had a good portion of the food (or dose of medicine). This may take several hours, so please be prepared to be on the ward for most of the day.

During the challenge your child will only be allowed to drink water or squash. Stopping them from eating other foods during the challenge increases the accuracy of the result.

Your child will need to stay on the ward for the duration of the challenge so that we can closely monitor them. Your named nurse will make regular checks of your child’s heart rate, blood pressure, temperature and general health, to make sure that any reaction is quickly picked up.

If your child has a definite reaction at any stage, the challenge will be stopped and we will give them the appropriate treatment.

At the end of the challenge the team will discuss the results with you. If appropriate, we will give you instructions on how to introduce the food into your child’s diet. We will also arrange a follow-up appointment in the Allergy Clinic.
What do I need to bring on the day of the challenge?

- If your child is having a challenge to a food not available from our diet kitchen, we may ask you to bring in some of the food with you. If this is the case we will contact you before the admission date and ask you to bring in the appropriate food.

- Sometimes, we need to disguise the taste of the challenge food with one other suitable food. This needs to be something that you know your child has had before, enjoys and is not allergic to. It needs to be easily mixable (e.g. yoghurt, formula milk). Please bring this food with you.

- For younger children it is also useful to bring their usual bottle/drinking cup and cutlery as this may encourage them to take the challenge food or drink.

- Please bring a packed lunch of your child’s usual foods for after the test. The reason for bringing food from home is to make sure that your child’s lunch consists of food that they are known to have had before, and are not allergic to.

- A favourite toy or comforter. We have a Play Specialist who can provide plenty of games and toys and also offer support and encouragement to your child throughout the day.

- Change for the car park.

- Please feel free to bring in some food for yourself. There are also shops and cafés in the hospital where you can purchase hot and cold food but, as your child will need to stay on the ward when the challenge has started they may not want you to leave. For safety reasons we do not allow hot drinks on the ward.

- Your child’s Epipen if they have one and any inhalers that they use.
Questions or concerns – how to contact us

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further questions or concerns.

Children’s Day Care Ward 01865 234 148
(Monday to Friday, 7.30am to 7.30pm)

Drayson Ward 01865 231 237
01865 234 049
(24 hours)

John Radcliffe Hospital Switchboard 01865 741 166
If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call 01865 221 473 or email PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk

Dr Clare Robertson, Consultant Paediatrician
Jackie Campbell, Advanced Nurse Practitioner
Lucy Knight, Senior Staff Nurse
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Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust
Oxford OX3 9DU
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information