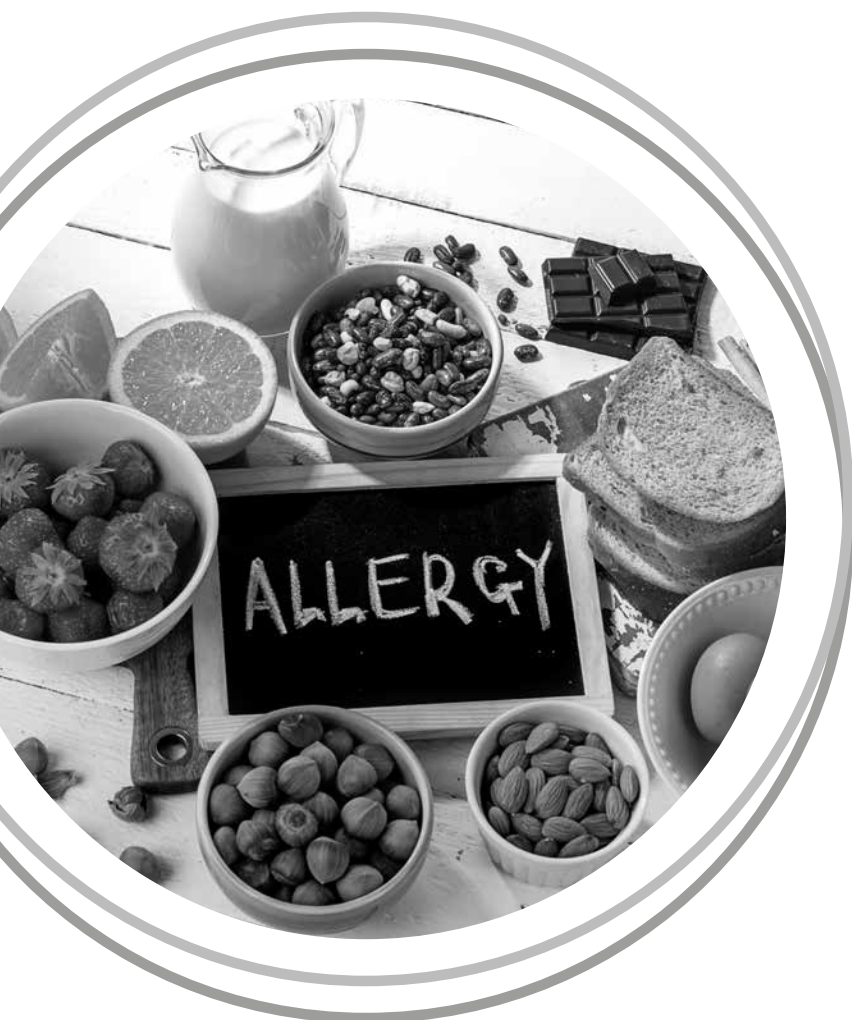


Food challenges

Information for
parents and carers



An appointment has been made for your child to have a food challenge. The following information should help you to prepare for coming into hospital.

What is a food challenge?

A food challenge is a test where 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; then increasing amounts are given either until a reaction occurs, or the challenge is completed without an allergic reaction. An admission for a food challenge usually lasts for about 5 hours.

Why do we carry out food challenges?

Food challenges are carried out:

- when we need to find out if a food is causing your child to have an allergic reaction

or

- to confirm whether your child has outgrown a previously confirmed allergy

If your child has an allergy, they may be at risk of a severe reaction when eating (or sometimes touching) the food that they are allergic to. This severe reaction is known as anaphylaxis and requires immediate treatment with a medicine called adrenaline; adrenaline is given by injection, and many people with severe allergies carry a “pen” or adrenaline auto-injector (Epipen®, Jext® or Emerade®) and are able to inject themselves or their child in an emergency.

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

However, over time some children outgrow their allergies, and may be able to tolerate the food that was previously causing them to have an allergic reaction.

We are offering a food challenge because your child is now likely to tolerate the food (based on their history and test results) and introducing that food into their diet may help to make their life easier.

What are the benefits?

A food challenge will confirm whether your child has a food allergy or not. If the challenge is successful (no reaction), we advise you to introduce the food into their diet regularly. 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 to the food, they will need to continue avoiding that food. Some parents and children have said that going through a failed challenge has helped them to better understand and manage their allergies.

What are the risks?

There is a potential risk of your child having an allergic reaction to the food tested; there is a 1-2 in 10 chance of a minor reaction, and a rare risk of an anaphylactic reaction. This is why the test is done in hospital where your child will be carefully monitored, and medical help is available when needed.

What are the alternatives to having a food challenge?

You may choose not to go ahead with the food challenge, and to continue avoiding the food that they might be allergic to. Your child may grow out of an allergy but a food challenge is the only safe and sure way to find out whether your child has a food allergy or not.

Other things to consider

The challenge involves eating the food (which they may find frightening because they usually have to avoid it) so you will need to prepare them for this.

Importantly, if they pass the challenge with no reaction, we will advise you to include the food in their diet regularly. Your child will need to eat the food at least twice weekly on an ongoing basis once they pass a food challenge. If you think that your child will not manage this, please contact us. Having a challenge and then having a period where they do not eat the relevant food can result in a reaction when it is introduced at a later time.

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

It is important to prepare your child for their hospital visit in order to help them to understand what is happening, and this can help with their willingness to cooperate on the day. Talking to your child beforehand will give them time to ask any questions; always give them truthful information. You may wish to bring some familiar toys or books on the day to help your child feel at ease.

Your child can eat a light snack and drink water during the challenge, and also have lunch once the challenge is completed, so please bring a packed lunch for you both. Please bring the food for your child's challenge, and it is also a good idea to bring other foods they like, so that they 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. Please note, if your child is having a challenge to baked egg or baked milk (muffin), you will receive a recipe to bake some muffins yourself and bring them in on the day.

Your child must be well with no cough, cold or recent infections for at least two weeks before the challenge. If they have asthma, eczema or hay-fever this must be well-controlled and stable.

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 (Brand names can include Piriton®, Zirtek® or Clarityn®). These should be stopped five days before the challenge. Please note that some cough medicines also contain antihistamine (for example, ingredients such as diphenhydramine, chlorphenamine or doxylamine) – check the label if you are unsure.

If your child has a reaction during this period of not taking antihistamines, please be safe and give antihistamines as you normally would to help the reaction. If this happens, contact the Children's Day Care Ward on 01865 234148 and we will rearrange the challenge.

Asthma medication – your child should continue to take their regular preventative asthma inhalers (usually brown, orange/red or purple). With regard to blue inhalers such as salbutamol or terbutaline (Ventolin® or Bricanyl®); if your child is wheezy, coughing or has needed their blue inhaler more often than usual in the two weeks before the challenge, please contact the ward 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.

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 will happen on the challenge day?

On arrival, we will explain the challenge in detail and answer any questions. 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). We will make sure that your child is fit and well to have the challenge, by listening to their chest and taking their temperature, blood pressure and oxygen levels. Your child will be closely monitored throughout the challenge.

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. The cannula is used to give additional medicines if a reaction occurs. 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.

Your child will usually eat up to five increasing doses of the food, given every 15 minutes (up to a normal portion size for their age). We need to observe your child for a further two hours. If your child has an allergic reaction before the end of the challenge, then no more food will be given; the reaction will be treated as required and your child will be observed 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?

We will tell you the outcome of the challenge and provide advice as needed.

After a successful challenge (no reaction), we will advise you to introduce the food into your child's diet regularly, generally twice a week.

After an unsuccessful challenge (a reaction), your child should continue to avoid the food. We will go through your child's Allergy Action Plan with you to make sure that you feel comfortable with the management of allergic reactions. We will make sure that you have clear written instructions. We will arrange follow-up in the allergy clinic if needed.

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)

Ward secretary’s number

01865 231 266
(Monday to Friday,
8.00am to 4.00pm)

John Radcliffe Hospital Switchboard

0300 3047777
(24 hours)

Further Information

If you need an interpreter or would like this information leaflet in another format, such as Easy Read, large print, Braille, audio, electronically or another language, please speak to the department where you are being seen. You will find their contact details on your appointment letter.

Author: Jackie Campbell, Advanced Nurse Practitioner
Dr Thisanayagam Umasunthar, Consultant Paediatrician

October 2020

Review: October 2023

Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
www.ouh.nhs.uk/information



Making a difference across our hospitals

charity@ouh.nhs.uk | 01865 743 444 | hospitalcharity.co.uk

OXFORD HOSPITALS CHARITY (REGISTERED CHARITY NUMBER 1175809)

