What is a food allergy?

A food allergy is an abnormal reaction to a food that involves the body's immune system. The most common allergens in children in the UK are; milk, soya, egg, peanut, tree nuts, sesame, fish, shellfish (prawns) & wheat. There are two types of food allergy; immediate or delayed.

An immediate type of food allergy is called an IgE mediated food allergy. This is a medical term standing for immunoglobulin E. These reactions happen soon after a food has been eaten and, in some cases, can potentially be life threatening. A life-threatening reaction to a food is called anaphylaxis. In preschool children the most common IgE mediated (immediate) food allergy is to egg and peanut.

A reaction to food can also happen more slowly, with symptoms appearing several hours after eating a food and the symptoms are often less severe. This is known as a delayed or non-IgE mediated food allergy. The immune system is still involved but a different type of immune reaction occurs. The most common delayed (non-IgE) food allergy is to cow's milk. Cow's milk allergy can be difficult to diagnose as there are lots of different symptoms involving different organ systems such as the skin and gut. One symptom rarely occurs alone so keeping a diary of the child's symptoms can help with the diagnosis.

Children can react to other foods such as soya, tree nuts, sesame and fish but these are less common in young children. Allergies to new or novel foods are also emerging to foods such as pea and lentil. More information about potential allergens can be found on the food standards agency website Allergen guidance for food businesses | Food Standards Agency and at anaphylaxis UK Allergy factsheets | Anaphylaxis UK

Around 5% of children in the UK will develop a food allergy by the time they are 2 years of age.

That means 5 out of every 100 children will have a food allergy by their second birthday.

Around half of these will have a delayed food allergy (non-IgE) and half will have an immediate (IgE) food allergy. Babies who develop significant eczema from an early age are more likely to get a food allergy.

It is important that children with food allergies have a firm diagnosis so that their allergies can be monitored and treated in the correct way. A GP will initially advise on this. If foods are avoided unnecessarily it can lead to nutritional deficiencies and poor growth. It is advisable for children with food allergies to get help and support from a paediatric dietitian specialising in food allergy.

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This factsheet was created with input from Dr Penny Barnard. Penny is a registered dietitian with over 25 years' experience working as an NHS paediatric dietitian. She specialises in paediatric food allergy and gastroenterology.

This information is evidenced based and correct at the time of writing (March 2024). It is not intended to replace advice given to a child by a healthcare professional. Any concerns about a child's health should be discussed with a GP in the first instance without delay.

[1]https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/allergen-guidance-for-food-businesses#allergens
[2]https://www.anaphylaxis.org.uk/factsheets/#other-food