Allergy question and answer factsheet for Early Years Practitioners

We asked Dr Penny Barnard, paediatric dietitian and allergy expert some frequently asked questions about food allergies. Here's what she said....

Q What should I do if a parent wants to eliminate a certain food from their child's diet due to a contact reaction?

A Reassure the parent that a contact reaction is different to a food allergy – use the information included in the factsheet 'what is a contact reaction' to help you do this. It might also be helpful to remind the parent that eliminating food from a child's diet unnecessarily can lead to nutrition deficiencies and may affect growth.

Q What advice should I give to a parent who suspects an allergy because their child has had an upset stomach several times which they believe is linked to a food?

A Advise they speak to their GP.

Q How should early years settings work with parents who are reintroducing a food back into their child's diet?

A Early years setting should have a policy to cover this topic. If the early years setting agrees to do this, strict written instructions should be followed by the early years setting that are provided by the parents.

Q When introducing solid foods, should parents be encouraged to introduce the main food allergens at home first before these are offered at nursery?

A There is no official guidance on this that I am aware of. My professional opinion is that the early years setting and parents should work in partnership. There would be some situations where I think introducing allergens for the first time in an early year's setting would not be appropriate. For the majority of children though, I think it would be appropriate.

Q For children with a diagnosed IgE mediated allergy we ask for a copy of the child's allergy action plan to ensure that we are following the correct procedures and advice. What documentation can we ask to see for children with a non-IgE mediated allergy?

A Children with a non-IgE food allergy (delayed) are likely to have had their food allergy diagnosed by their GP, dietitian, health visitor, community nursery nurse or paediatrician. Ask to see clinic letters from these healthcare professionals. Some of the children, especially if they are under 12 months of age, may start nursery before they have seen a healthcare professional. In this situation you could ask to see the referral letter from the GP to the healthcare practitioner.

Q How should I support a child with a food intolerance?

A Supporting a child with a food intolerance would need to be on an individual basis depending on their food intolerance. It is recommended to refer to the factsheet 'What is a food intolerance' for more information about how best to support a child with a suspected food intolerance.

Q Do all allergic children need to avoid food products with precautionary labels such as 'may contain' of their allergen?

A This is a decision that should be made by the parents after a discussion with their allergy team or GP. The decision is made having undertaken a risk assessment of eating a certain food with precautionary allergen labelling on.

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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.