

Managing food allergies – what you need to know

With 1 in 12 children in the UK suffering from a food allergy, how can you be sure you are doing everything you can to accommodate them and keep them safe?

What is the best way to care for children with allergies? How can you manage the juggling act of multiple allergies and what are the important steps you can take to minimise the risk of children in your care having a reaction?

It's complicated...

It's important that you and your team understand there's a difference between a food allergy and an intolerance. Food allergies can cause life-threatening anaphylactic reactions. A child's reaction to eating a food they are intolerant to could be uncomfortable and unpleasant, but is unlikely to cause lasting harm.

Common allergies and symptoms

According to the NHS, the most common food allergies in children are:

- Milk
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Tree nuts – such as walnuts, hazelnuts, almonds and cashews
- Fish
- Shellfish

Most children will grow out of milk and egg allergies, but only 10-20% will grow out of a peanut allergy.

A child's risk of developing an allergy is increased if they have eczema or have a family history of allergies. The worse the child's eczema is and the earlier it developed, the more likely they are to have an allergy.

Many allergies develop when a child is between one and two years old, so early years practitioners can play a crucial role in helping a family identify whether their child may have an allergy which would need investigation by a doctor. However, some children are diagnosed much later.

There are two types of allergy – those generating an immediate reaction and others which can create a delayed reaction, making it even trickier to know if it's really an allergy, and to find out what the allergen is.

It's important practitioners are vigilant about these symptoms children at your nursery may not yet have a diagnosis but could be starting to exhibit the symptoms of an allergy.

All children are different, but there are some common food allergy symptoms to look out for.

Symptoms of an immediate allergy include:

- A flushed face, hives, a red and itchy rash around the mouth tongue or eyes which can spread over the whole body
- Mild swelling, especially of the lips, eyes and face
- A blocked or runny nose, watering eyes and sneezing
- Nausea and vomiting, tummy cramps and diarrhoea
- A scratchy mouth or throat

Symptoms of a severe (anaphylactic) allergic reaction include:

- Wheezing or chest tightness, similar to the symptoms of an asthma attack
- Swelling of the tongue or throat which can cause difficulties breathing
- Shock, caused by a sudden drop in blood pressure
- Dizziness, confusion, collapse, loss of consciousness, sometimes coma

If a child has a delayed reaction they could have different symptoms such as eczema, poor growth, reflux, swelling in the bowel, constipation and/or diarrhoea, raising knees to chest with tummy pain and frequent distress or crying.



Of course, we all know that one of the difficult things about caring for young children is that they can't tell you what's wrong. Not only can they not communicate effectively with you, but they may not have the awareness to understand what's happening. Making sure all of your team have an awareness of allergy symptoms is really important.

Treating allergies

Children with a diagnosed allergy will have their own medication and treatment plan, which you should make sure that all staff, not just their key worker, are aware of.

For all allergies, prevention is the best cure, so avoiding the allergen is always going to be the most important thing. But in the unfortunate event of an allergic reaction, an anti-histamine is likely to be the first step. In the case of a severe allergy an Epi-pen is also likely to be prescribed.

Allergic reactions can also prompt asthma attacks, which will also need treating in line with the child's care plan.

If a child does not have a diagnosed allergy but you think they are having an allergic reaction, call 999.

Food in nurseries

Since 2014, nurseries providing food and snacks have had obligations under the EU Food Information for Consumers Regulations. This means you have to provide accurate information about food and snacks which contain any of 14 allergen ingredients.

You need to make parents aware of the allergens in food you produce and the snacks you offer – including pre-packed snacks. This can be by putting it on the menu board, sending home menus or any way you choose.

There's lots of information on the Food Standards Agency's website to help you understand what you need to do.

Many nurseries choose to have a "no nuts" policy across the board to help manage the risk to children, especially as some children don't develop allergies until they are older.

Karli Booth of



Toddle In Private Nursery in Colne, Lancashire (pictured above) said: "We have a no nuts policy across the board as we just think it's the safest way. With an egg or milk allergy it's fairly easy to exclude these things from a child's diet, but nuts just get everywhere.

"We go as far as to make sure all of our trips are nut-free too, so a trip involving food would need to not have nuts included or we wouldn't go."

NDNA's Lead Early Years Adviser Jo Baranek is keen that the risk of children sharing food is well-managed. "We encourage staff to sit and eat with the children at mealtimes and this makes it easier to manage those with allergies.

"I would sit next to a child with an allergy to keep a closer eye on them and make sure that they aren't taking food off someone else's plate. It's tricky to balance the concept of sharing, which of course is important at nursery, with keeping a child with an allergy safe when someone else's food looks tempting!"

MEMBERS RESOURCES

NDNA runs a Level 2 online allergy awareness training course for childcare practitioners, fully accredited by Qualifi. This covers all mandatory Level 2 allergy awareness syllabus. Go to www.ndna.org.uk/allergy



Food Standards Agency website Top tips for dealing with food allergies

- Have a food allergy policy and train all of your team on the symptoms – a "no nuts" policy will remove that risk for children and staff
- Coloured plates and bowls are a great visual aid for highlighting special diets
- Spend time with the parents of any child with an allergy to talk through the child's care plan. Involve senior staff and the child's key worker when possible. With food allergies there are nuances to symptoms which can be hard to capture in a written plan alone
- Train all staff in paediatric first aid – see the box below for information about Millie's Mark
- Plan carefully for trips, making sure medication is taken with you and that the type of trip is suitable for all of your children
- Consider how you store and handle any ingredients your children are allergic to. Hygiene in the kitchen and regular hand-washing becomes even more important when looking after a child with a severe allergy
- Include allergy information on your menu boards
- Keep photos of children and information about their allergies in their key rooms and anywhere they will eat so all staff can see at a glance what they need to be aware of

Millie's Mark is a special endorsement for early years settings which go above and beyond when it comes to paediatric first aid training. More than 200 nurseries now hold the accreditation.

To gain the accreditation nurseries must:

- Provide evidence through a full setting audit that they are doing everything practicable to keep children safe
- Demonstrate they are deploying their most confident staff effectively
- Prove all staff hold an appropriate in-date PFA (full or emergency) certificate

The process takes three to six months and includes tools such as a comprehensive audit, staff confidence audit and training matrix.

To find out more about Millie's Mark visit www.milliesmark.com

