

Fish and shellfish allergy

Information and advice for parents and carers

Paediatric Nutrition & Dietetics

Allergy to fish and shellfish is quite common but people who are allergic to fish may be able to eat shellfish and vice versa.

It is rare for a fish-allergic person to be allergic to all types of fish. However, it may be easier to avoid all fish due to the risk of cross-contamination on fish counters and in restaurants. This is the same for shellfish.

How is a fish and shellfish allergy diagnosed?

To confirm your child has a fish or shellfish allergy, their doctor/nurse may perform a skin prick test or blood test (sIgE). For the skin prick test, a small amount of fish or shellfish extract in a solution will be applied on your child's arm and their skin will be pricked, they may feel a slight scratch.

It is important to know that the size of the reaction on a skin prick test or the sIgE level of a blood test shows how likely a reaction is to happen if your child is exposed to fish or shellfish, it does not predict the severity of the reaction.

What causes the allergy?

It is still uncertain why people develop food allergies. An allergic reaction to food is caused when the body's immune system treats harmless proteins found in food as a threat to the body by mistake. It then releases chemicals such as histamine to prevent this threat, which it treats as an infection. These chemicals can cause a variety of symptoms of allergy.

For children who are extremely sensitive to fish and/or shellfish, simply being around cooked/cooking fish and/or shellfish can cause a reaction by breathing in the fish particles in the air. In this case fish and/or shellfish should not be cooked at home and places where fish are likely to be found should be avoided e.g. fish market, fish restaurant.

For those who are less sensitive, only eating the fish or shellfish will produce an allergic response. If you want to try your child with a different fish it is advisable to speak to your allergy team about it first.

What are the symptoms of an allergic reaction?

Symptoms of a mild reaction

Most children only have a mild to moderate reaction when exposed to fish/shellfish. The following symptoms may look or feel serious but fall in the mild category:

- Urticaria (blotchy red rash, like nettle rash)
- Funny feeling/taste in the mouth
- Lip, eye or facial swelling
- Vomiting

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Symptoms of a severe reaction

A severe allergic reaction is known as anaphylaxis. This is a very rare reaction that only the most sensitive of people are at risk of. Anaphylaxis symptoms include:

- Difficulty in breathing or asthma attack
- Throat tightening
- Tongue swelling
- Drowsiness

How is an allergic reaction treated?

If your child has eaten food which contains fish/shellfish, you should do one of the following:

Mild reaction

Give them an antihistamine tablet such as chlorphenamine (Piriton) or loratidine (Clarityn).

Severe reaction

Children considered at high risk of anaphylaxis are prescribed an Epipen to carry with them at all times as part of an overall care plan. This is an adrenaline auto-injector (similar to an injection). If your child is given an Epipen, we will show you how to use it.

If your child has an anaphylactic reaction, you must treat it promptly with an Epipen and then dial '999'. If you do not have an Epipen then dial 999 straight away. Tell them that your child is having an allergic reaction and the symptoms.

You will be given more detailed, written information about treating an allergic attack at your child's allergy clinic appointment.

Examples of foods containing fish and/or shellfish

- Paella (Spanish dish)
- Bouillabaisse (Mediterranean soup)
- Gumbo (American Creole soup)
- Frito misto (Mediterranean dish)
- Kedgeree (English breakfast dish)
- Fruits de Mer (French word for sea food)
- Surimi (processed seafood gel)
- Caesar salad and dressing (contains anchovies)
- Many oriental sauces, pastas and prepared meals.
- Gentleman's Relish/Patum
- Peperium (paste of anchovies)

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- Caponata (Sicilian dish/relish)
- Some Worcestershire sauces contain anchovies

Please note this is not a complete list

From an early age try to teach your child to always ask an adult before trying a new food.

Advice when:

Food shopping

There is a risk that different types of fish will come into contact on the fish counter so it may be best to avoid all types.

Always read food labels for fish/shellfish even on foods eaten regularly. This is particularly important if the food item has had a change to the recipe. Your dietitian can help you with this if you are unsure how to read food labels.

Eating out

Always let the staff in restaurants and takeaways know that your child has a fish/shellfish allergy and if they cannot reassure you that the food is fish/shellfish free then choose an alternative dish or eat elsewhere.

Informing your child's school and/or carers

Please ensure all carers are aware of your child's allergy and the treatment plan. Schools and day care nurseries will need to draw up a care plan for your child and staff will need to be trained in recognition and treatment of an allergic reaction. They will need to have antihistamines and/or an EpiPen kept at the school or nursery.

Allergy notification bracelet/chain

You may wish to consider purchasing a Medicalert bracelet or chain for your child which will carry information about his/her allergy. You can do this by contacting:

Medicalert

Freephone: 0800 581420

Email: info@medicalert.org.uk

Website: www.medicalert.org.uk

Medi-Tag

Tel: 0121 200 1616

Website: www.medi-tag.co.uk

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Contact Details

Your doctor may offer a further clinic appointment depending on the assessment of your child. If your child has a serious reaction or develops asthma you should arrange for them to be referred to the allergy clinic for a review of their treatment plan.

Dietitian: _____ Tel: _____

Further information

For more information about allergies and the support available:

Allergy UK

www.allergyuk.org

Helpline: 01322 619 898

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our websites www.swbh.nhs.uk and www.swbhengage.com, follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and like us on Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

- EBM Guidelines, 'Food allergy and hypersensitivity in children', 2010
- Host, A et al, 'Dietary prevention of allergic diseases in infants and small children.' Paediatric Allergy Immunology, February 2008
- National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 'Food allergy in children and young people' (CG116) , February 2011
- National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 'Anaphylaxis: assessment to confirm an anaphylactic episode and the decision to refer after emergency treatment for a suspected anaphylactic episode' (CG134), December 2011

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5495 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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