

Five Key Things to Learn

Advice provided by allergyuk.org



There are five key things you need to teach your child about their allergy or allergies.

1. The thing(s) they are allergic to...

Some allergies - such as food allergies or insect sting allergy - can be easy for children to understand. They learn that if they come into contact with one of these allergens they will have an unpleasant reaction. Yet it can be more difficult for children to understand that they may become unwell due to things that they cannot see such as pollen or house dust mites.

It is helpful for children to have a visual aid so they can understand what it is that they are actually allergic to. With food allergies children may have a list of different foods that contain the allergen, but they might not know what the foods look like. Pictures (from the internet or books) allow children to understand that while their symptoms seem to come from nowhere, they are actually caused by a specific substance. This can be an important first step for them in accepting their allergy and understanding why their treatment is necessary.

The best way to teach a child about allergy is to talk about it over time, rather than try to give them a 'lesson' on allergy. For younger children especially, too much information at one time will mean that they may not remember what you have told them.

Always start with the most important

point which is how to avoid an allergic reaction. With a severe allergy it is essential that the child understands the need to avoid the allergic substances and what to do if they have a reaction.

If the allergy causes uncomfortable symptoms rather than life threatening symptoms, then explain what causes the symptoms and how avoiding the triggers can minimise the risk of an allergic reaction. With allergic diseases where controlling symptoms can be a constant battle, avoiding triggers can improve a child's wellbeing and their condition.

As time goes on and children accept their condition you can explain more about why it is caused and the different forms that the allergen can take (for example, in food). Discussing the allergy and the symptoms can also be a good distraction technique while you administer treatments and it will help the child to learn and feel involved. It can also be a good time to talk positively about what alternatives the child has rather than focussing on the restrictions caused by allergic disease.

It is good for carers to ask the child about their symptoms and treatments so that the child knows they can discuss their allergy. It is important that anyone caring for your child understands the allergy and how treatments are administered and regular discussion helps the child feel in control and confident about their allergy. For parents, asking your child questions about the treatment and the allergy is a useful



For more help, contact the Allergy UK helpline:

9am to 5pm,
Monday to Friday

01322 619 898

info@allergyuk.org

Key facts

Food labelling can change occasionally and the Allergy UK website can provide you with up-to-date information.

It is helpful for children to have a visual aid so they can understand what it is that they are actually allergic to

It is important that children learn from an early age to tell people if they begin to feel unwell



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way of assessing how much they really understand and it can help to gently reinforce important points.

For very young children, using dolls for role play can be a fun and different way of educating them about their condition. If one of their toys has the same health issue, then this can be a way of teaching them about the condition and how the treatments help. For demonstrating eczema treatments for example using a plastic doll that you can wash between sessions is ideal.

Using special toys and dolls can also be a way for you to explore how your child feels. Children can often talk about their toy's emotions before they can talk about their own so when they talk about what their toy is feeling they can actually be expressing their own feelings.

Using toy shops, tea sets and doctor kits can also be used for role play and may help you discuss allergy with your child. DVDs, books and videos can also help a child to identify with others who have allergy and reduce their feelings of isolation.

2. The thing(s) they are Not allergic to...

Although children need to understand which allergens are a problem they also need to know which things are safe and will not cause them any reactions. Children who worry about their allergies can also become concerned about other everyday substances which are safe for them.

With young children it can be good to play quiz games where you name something and they have to say whether it's safe or not. For older children, simply talk to them about the alternatives they can choose in order to avoid the allergen.

Children can easily believe the wrong information. For example, a child who has learnt that their allergy is caused by pollen in the air may be worried that anything they can smell or see in the air is pollen. Explain-

ing clearly what is not going to cause them problems will remove their feelings of anxiety.

It is natural for parents and children to feel anxious about allergy, particularly if an allergen has caused a serious reaction in the past. But anxiety can be reduced by focussing on things that do not cause a problem for the child. It is important for families to be able to enjoy everything else in their lives, rather than just focusing on the problem of allergy.

Food allergy can lead to children having restricted diets and perhaps developing anxieties about all foods. It is important to include as many different – safe – foods as possible while emphasising that one food allergy does not mean that children are necessarily allergic to other foods. As a parent, you need to have a good understanding of your child's allergies and be sure that you have checked for possible allergens in the foods you are providing. You can then feel confident and relaxed about feeding your family.

Children can start restricting their lifestyles because of their allergies, but you can help to avoid this by clearly explaining what will - or will not - cause a reaction. For example, make sure your child knows they are allergic to dogs, but not cats, or that their hay fever will only occur at certain times of the year.

3. That Treatments Work

When children have experienced ill health due to their allergies, they are aware that allergies restrict their lives. Perhaps they have been unable to breathe because of badly blocked sinuses or constricted airways, their skin might be sore and irritated skin due to atopic eczema or their ears feel blocked and they cannot hear properly. All these symptoms of allergy can have a negative impact upon a child's quality of life.

Sometimes, even when treatments have improved their condition, children can still believe that they are unable to do certain things. For example, if a child

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could not play sport for a long time because of health problems, they may think they just can't do the activity.

Once treatments start to make a noticeable difference to their symptoms, be it through good asthma control, rhinitis being managed, or skin problems being more tolerable, then you can make a big difference to your child's life by encouraging them to participate in activities. Over time, this allows the negative feelings associated with allergy symptoms to be replaced with positive attitudes and enjoyable experiences.

This is one of the reasons why it is so important to attend follow-up appointments with healthcare professionals and to have your child monitored regularly. It helps you and your child understand how their condition is progressing and as treatments start to work your child can be encouraged to live a fuller life. It is important that teachers are also regularly updated with information on your child's condition so that they can form reasonable expectations about what your child can do.

Even very young children can feel that they can't do things but they may pretend that they can't be bothered. This is because many children would rather be thought of as lazy instead of incapable, or lacking in skill. So a child who has found that in the past sport caused difficulty breathing, or that they were teased because of their eczema, is likely to keep up an attitude of "can't or won't" take part in activities. You can gently challenge your child to keep trying so that these attitudes don't become ingrained. And they will soon learn that an active lifestyle is enjoyable, that it will improve their health and that it will help them feel included socially.

A healthy diet, regular exercise, and fresh air are all important to a child's wellbeing and social interaction with their friends is extremely important for their emotional health. There is no reason why children with

allergies and their families cannot enjoy a safe, active and social childhood.

4. The Names of Allergens

If your child suffers from food allergies, it's particularly important that they know the names of allergens. Labels on food products have to give allergen advice in the ingredients list based on 14 key food allergens but while foods must be labelled, many allergens can be given different names. For instance, a child with a cow's milk allergy needs to know the word 'milk' but also 'casein' and 'whey'.

Teaching older children the names of allergens can help them make decisions about their food while younger children may need to be shown pictures of the foods to help them understand.

Food labelling can change occasionally and the Allergy UK website can provide you with up-to-date information.

5. Speak Up!

It is important that children learn from an early age to tell people if they begin to feel unwell. This is not easy and children can feel self-conscious asking questions or drawing attention to themselves with other people around them.

Role playing at home can increase a child's confidence about asking questions. So if they are allergic to cats and have been invited to a friend's house they could practise asking 'Do you have a cat?' You can also encourage a child to start asking the right questions to waiters or parents who offer them food. Key questions will include: 'Has it got nuts in it?' or 'Can I see the ingredients list?'

Remember that while a child is young and being cared for by other people, speaking up should not replace clear, written instructions from you about your child's condition.

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By prompting them to ask questions at an early age, a child can be trained for life to take an active interest in their environment and the ways that allergens can affect them.

Encourage your child to talk positively about their health but also acknowledge that there will be times when symptoms seem overwhelming and that they will have days when they will not cope as well with their feelings or allergy. Sometimes by focusing on how treatments have made them feel better or how good their skin seems at the moment, children can be encouraged to speak up when things go wrong. This is very important because allergic conditions can change throughout childhood.

Parents can be vigilant for the signs of allergy but the child is always best placed to keep you aware of how allergic conditions are changing. By encouraging children to speak up and by listening and interpreting what they say, parents and other carers can act quickly and seek help. If a child is too young to speak up independently, the use of stickers or ID jewellery can be useful. For more information on this contact our helpline on **01322 619898**.

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