
All about challenges

We have given you this factsheet because your child has been asked to come to the Children's unit for a drug or food challenge. It includes what a food challenge is, what will happen during the challenge and how to care for your child after the challenge. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a member of the allergy team.

What is a challenge?

We carry out two types of challenges at our hospital.

Diagnostic – Sometimes it is unclear if a food/drug is causing the reaction. This test will confirm whether your child is allergic to the food/drug or not.

Resolution – This test will confirm whether your child has outgrown their food allergy.

How is a challenge performed?

You and your child will be admitted to the Children's Unit for half a day, in some cases you may need to stay all day. An allergy nurse will look after your child under close supervision of medically trained staff.

When you arrive, you and your child will have the opportunity to ask any questions and the allergy nurse will explain the intended benefits and risks of the test. If you are happy to go ahead with the challenge, we will ask the parent or legal guardian to sign a consent form.

Before we begin the food challenge, we will examine your child and record their general state of health. If your child seems unwell, the challenge may have to be cancelled. Included in a general assessment is taking your child's temperature, pulse, blood pressure, height and weight.

In children over five years of age who have asthma symptoms. Spirometry will be taken measuring how much air out can be breathed out in one forced breath.

The challenge is performed by feeding your child a food or drug bit by bit in increasing doses until a top amount or dose is successfully eaten. At each stage of the food or drug being taken, your child is carefully checked for signs of an allergic reaction. Once all of the doses have been eaten or administered, you will need to stay on the ward for two hours to make sure that there is no delayed reaction to the challenge.

Food challenges can cause an allergic reaction, most reactions involve the eyes, nose, mouth and skin or gut. Anaphylaxis is a more severe form of these symptoms and can affect the airway, breathing or circulation. We will assess your child throughout the challenge. If your child shows symptoms of an allergic reaction, we will stop the challenge and treat as necessary.

Please bring your child's favourite foods that can be mixed with the test food to hide the taste. This must be something that your child has had before and does not react to. Also bring a packed Lunch.

Medications your child may be taking before the test

Antihistamines

Your child may be taking prescribed medications containing antihistamines, e.g. Chlorphenamine, Loratadine, Cetirizine, fexofenadine, Piriton®, Clarityn®, Zirtek®. Most cough medicines also contain antihistamines. It is essential that all these are stopped 5 days before admission as they can hide symptoms of an allergic reaction during a challenge. If these are not stopped, it will not be possible for the test to be performed. If you have any worries or concerns about stopping this or any other medication listed below, please contact the allergy nurse on 0300 019 3111.

Asthma medication

Your child should continue to take their regular preventative asthma inhalers (usually brown, orange or purple). Blue inhalers (salbutamol (Ventolin®) or terbutaline (Bricanyl®)); if your child is wheezy, coughing or has needed their blue inhaler more often than usual in the two weeks before the challenge, please contact the allergy team on 0300 019 3111 before the challenge day to discuss this further.

If your child has hay fever.

We do not advise that your child has a food challenge during the pollen season. We will arrange another date when it is safe to stop their antihistamines treatment.

If your child is unwell.

It is important that your child is well when undertaking the challenge. If your child is unwell including a cough, a cold, a temperature, diarrhoea or vomiting or rash or worse eczema than normal please contact the allergy nurse as your appointment will need to be re-scheduled.

If your child carries an EpiPen® or Jext please bring it (them) with you on the day of the test.

After the challenge

Your child should not take part in any strenuous play or activities for the rest of the day, as this could bring on a delayed reaction.

Your child should not eat the food challenged for 48 hours (even if they did not react to the food during the challenge) in case of delayed symptoms. 48 hours open access will be given to the children's unit.

If your child reacts, please stay with child for at least 12 hours after discharge home. You must continue to strictly avoid the food in your child's diet as advised by your allergy nurses. For 48 hours after the failed challenge please give your child antihistamines as prescribed.

If your child does not react to the challenge, it is important to introduce the food into your child's diet after 48 hours. Advice will be given before you are discharged.

Drug challenge – with some drug challenges you must continue to give the drug for a further five to seven days at home, to determine whether it continues to be tolerated. Occasionally a delayed reaction may occur. You will be given a leaflet detailing these reactions on the day of the challenge and will be given open access to the Children's Unit for 7 days after the challenge.

Follow up

This will be discussed fully with you during your admission. Your GP will receive a letter informing them of the challenge result.

Contact details

Children's Assessment Unit (CAU) Tel: 0300 019 2613
Allergy Nurse Tel: 0300 019 3111

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We can supply this information in other formats, in larger print, on audiotape, or have it translated for you. Please call the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01202 665511, text 07758 272495 or email pals@uhd.nhs.uk for advice.

If you wish to make any comments or to ask about any research evidence used to write this leaflet, please contact the Patient Information Team confidentially: phone 0300 019 8003, write to the Health Information Centre (address above), or email patient.information@uhd.nhs.uk.