

# Recognizing Parental and Child Anxiety and The Role of Anxiety in Motivation for OIT

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# Food Allergy

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- Food allergy is associated with a poorer quality of life than other conditions such as diabetes or asthma, and is associated with greater psychological distress such as anxiety, worry and stress

# Food Allergy Related Anxiety

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- Rarely addressed by providers including some allergists
- Food allergy anxiety related questionnaire developed, audit after implementation yielded 0% food allergy patients / parents screened for anxiety (Kristine Vanijcharoenkarn, MD; JACI FEBRUARY 2019)

# Food Allergy Related Anxiety

Gurkiran Birdi, Richard Cooke, Rebecca Knibb, "Quality of Life, Stress, and Mental Health in Parents of Children with Parentally Diagnosed Food Allergy Compared to Medically Diagnosed and Healthy Controls", *Journal of Allergy*, vol. 2016

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- Food allergy in the child results in a poorer mental health of the parents compared to parents of children with no food allergy.
- Poorer mental health was present irrespective of whether the food allergy diagnosis was by a clinician or by the parent and was not due to the parent having food allergy
- Parents who “self” diagnosed the food allergy in their child reported higher levels of stress and anxiety than parents of children with no food allergy and parents whose children were medically diagnosed
- Some of the stress and anxiety in the parents who had diagnosed the food allergy themselves may be due to the uncertainty of not having a medical diagnosis or a lack of information from healthcare professionals

# Understanding Anxiety Around Food Allergy

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- It is natural to have a certain amount of anxiety when thinking about potential threat or danger
- Such rational anxiety can be helpful to keep the food allergic patient safe
- Intense anxiety leading to restrictions in daily life is unhealthy and leads to the vicious anxiety cycle

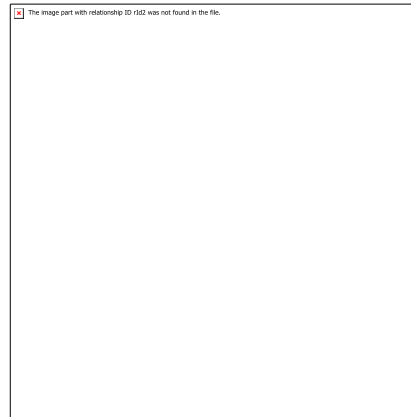
# The Food Allergy Vicious Anxiety Cycle

## Thoughts

My child might have a reaction to this food, am I putting my child in danger?  
Am I failing my child?  
I'm a bad parent because I can't get my child to eat

## Behaviors

Avoid giving your child new foods  
Avoid people, places or social situations  
Make excuses, leave early  
Employ safety behaviors e.g. fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, making sure you have someone with them



## Feelings

Anxious	Tense
Stressed	Heart racing
Frightened	Breathing fast
Guilty	Butterflies
Worried	Shaky
Judged	Sweaty

# Parental Stress and Anxiety

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- 81% of parents' face 'significant worry' about their child's food allergy
- 42% met the clinical cut-off for post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS)
- 39% reported moderate to extremely severe anxiety.
- Parents whose children have had to have an adrenaline auto-injector administered were seven times more likely to experience PTSS
- Mixed results for the relationship between allergy severity and parent mental health, with PTSS observed in parents of children with both life-threatening and milder allergies.
- [Parental Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Pediatric Food Allergy](#); *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* on March 11, 2021.



# Anxiety in Food Allergic Children

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- From an early age kids are told by parents, caregivers, and even some doctors that they will die if they eat the food, they are allergic to
- Parents and caregivers' tone plays a huge role in increasing the fear and anxiety in the child
- Children who experience anaphylaxis have difficulty trusting adults
- Parents' anxiety can be passed on to their kids. “constantly saying things like ‘Don’t touch that’ and ‘Don’t eat that’” the child is going to start internalizing it and will become anxious as well
- If the parents can stay calm during a food allergic reaction, this can send a powerful message to the child that reactions are serious, but can be managed

# Identify Parents/Patients at Risk of Poorer Psychological Health or Less Able to Cope

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- Parents and children with high levels of stress and anxiety, especially if they often worry about many things in their life
- Children who live with anxious fearful parents concerned about food allergies “Children feed off their parents, model their behavior after their parents”
- Parents and children with poor levels of knowledge or have misperceptions about food allergies
- Parents and children with negative attitudes towards food allergy
- Parents of children and children who have experienced a severe anaphylactic reaction

# Anxiety and OIT

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- OIT; families must go from fearing exposure to a specific food with potentially life-threatening consequences and completely restricting exposure, to encouraging a child to eat small amounts of that same food. It is anxiety provoking even in less anxious parents and patients
- Consider the psychological readiness and impact before starting OIT
- Severe parental anxiety is likely to hinder the success of OIT, perceived reactions, persistent questioning of the child about reactions to the level the child believes he/she has a reaction.
- In such cases, CONSIDER family evaluation and consultation with a trained psychologist before starting OIT

# The Need for Psychological Intervention

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- Not enough worry
- No assessment of risk
- No carriage of Epi
- Lack of understanding
- High risk of accidental reaction

- Good self-efficacy
- Carriage of Epi
- Knowledge and understanding of risk and use of Epi
- Good quality of life

- High stress, anxiety and worry
- Hypervigilance regarding risk
- Lack of understanding
- Poor quality of life



**INTERVENTION NEEDED**

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# Anxiety and OIT

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- Many Parents with acceptable level of anxiety seek OIT to free themselves from the parental anxiety
- OIT can be part of anxiety treatment. This is known as "*behavioral exposure*", which is an important part of the treatment of anxiety

# Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

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- CBT can help the child learn the relationships between anxiety and unhelpful thoughts and behaviors
- The child can be taught ways to think about challenging situations in a more realistic and manageable way
- The child can also be taught strategies to help him/her identify and better cope with the physical symptoms of anxiety

# Food Allergy Related Anxiety, What Can We Do?

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- Allergists need to empower parents and older patients with facts related to the incidences of reactions and fatalities before the social media scare them (Facts before Fears).
- DO IT AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE after the diagnosis (consider a second visit with the parents only)
- Address needle phobia (Epinephrine devices), it is a major contributing factor to the food allergy related anxiety.

# Food Allergy Related Anxiety, Questions

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- The statement: “If you use the EpiPen, immediately call 911 and go to the ER”.
  - Does it cause, exacerbate, or amplify the food allergy related anxiety?
  - Does it result in hesitancy to use the EpiPen??
  - Does it result in delaying appropriate treatment??
  - Did we learn anything from the change in food action plans during the COVID-19 pandemic??
- How about OIT related action plans, do you advise the same (911 and ER)??
- We need to ask ourselves “why diabetics young and old don’t have the same level of needle phobia”



# References

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