

First study of its kind finds children with food allergies are often victims of bullying

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In the first-ever study to assess the social impact of food allergies in children, Mount Sinai researchers have found that approximately 35 percent of children with food allergies, who are over the age of five, were reported to have experienced bullying, teasing, or harassment as a result of their allergies.

Of those experiencing teasing or [harassment](#), 86 percent were reported to have experienced repeated episodes. [Classmates](#) were the most common perpetrators, but surprisingly more than 20 percent reported harassment or teasing from teachers and other school staff. The data are reported in the October issue of *Annals of Allergy, [Asthma](#) & Immunology*.

Led by Scott H. Sicherer, MD, Professor of Pediatrics, Jaffe Food Allergy Institute at Mount Sinai School of Medicine, researchers analyzed survey responses from 353 parents or caregivers of [children](#) with food allergies and food-allergic individuals. The survey was conducted at meetings of the Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network in Tarrytown, New York, Rosemont, Illinois, and Baltimore, Maryland in 2009.

"We know that food allergy in children affects quality of life and causes issues like anxiety, depression, and stress for them and their parents," said Dr. Sicherer. "However, our study is the first to explore teasing, harassment and [bullying](#) behaviors aimed at these children. The results are disturbing, as they show that children not only have to struggle with

managing their food allergies, but also commonly bear harassment from their peers."

More than 43 percent were reported to have had the allergen waved in their face and 64 percent were reported as having experienced verbal teasing. No allergic reactions resulted from the bullying, but approximately 65 percent reported resulting feelings of depression and embarrassment.

"It was recently estimated that nearly one in 25 children has a food allergy," said Dr. Sicherer. "What is so concerning about these results is the high rate of teasing, harassment and bullying, its impact on these vulnerable children, and the fact that perpetrators include not only other children, but adults as well. Considering the seriousness of food allergy, these unwanted behaviors risk not only adverse emotional outcomes, but physical risks as well. It is clear that efforts to rectify this issue must address a better understanding of food allergies as well as strict no-bullying programs in schools."

A previous study by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development showed that 17 percent of children in grades 6 through 10 reported being bullied. While this study was not designed to determine prevalence of bullying in children with [food allergy](#), the number of patients bullied in the corresponding age group according to the survey is double that of the prior study. The authors suggest that school programs designed to reduce bullying should include information about the vulnerable population of children with food allergies.

Provided by The Mount Sinai Hospital

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