

First study published connecting challenges of food allergies with personality traits

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University of Otago research has shown that personality traits can impact those living with food allergies. Credit: Creative Commons

University of Otago researchers have broken new ground in the area of food allergies, with a study showing that personality traits impact people living with a food allergy published in the international medical journal *Frontiers in Psychology*.

The interdisciplinary team of researchers from Otago's Department of Psychology (Dr. Tamlin Conner) and the Department of Food Science (Dr. Rana Peniamina, Dr. Miranda Miroso, and Professor Phil Bremer) wanted to investigate the challenges that adults with food allergies face managing their condition in daily life, and whether certain [personality](#) traits made these challenges even greater.

Lead author Dr. Tamlin Conner says "This paper addresses this question by investigating whether individual differences in the big five personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) are related to food allergy-related problems in everyday life."

For two weeks, 108 adult participants with a physician-diagnosed food allergy completed a daily online survey that queried the occurrence of 25 food allergy issues each day and their stress and mood. Dr. Conner says the findings went against the research team's hypothesis.

"We were surprised that neuroticism did not lead to more frequent allergy issues or poorer mood on days with more allergy issues. Instead, higher openness to experience was the biggest predictor of more issues, which included going hungry because there is no safe food available, problems finding suitable foods when grocery shopping, anxiety at social occasions involving food, being excluded, and feeling embarrassed and poorly understood about their food allergy."

"It appears the demands of coping with a food allergy – requiring caution, routine and consumption of known foods – might be in direct conflict with the open personality that craves exploration, variety and novel experiences", Dr. Conner adds.

She hopes the findings will help people understand how their personality affects the way they cope and manage their food allergy.

"For example, 'open' people could try to channel their desire for variety in other directions instead of food, like music or film. They could also have 'back-up food' available in case they wanted to do something spontaneous. Our findings might also help parents understand how their child with a food allergy may be being impacted. For example, open children might be more likely to want to try new foods, which could put them at risk. Knowing their child's personality, a parent could look to mitigate those impacts to reduce their frequency."

National charitable organisation Allergy New Zealand says food allergy can create significant burden for many people, and welcomes the study bringing further knowledge to the condition.

"It [the study] highlights the complexities facing adults managing food allergy, in a New Zealand context, as well also from a unique perspective. Helping people understand how their [personality traits](#) might help or hinder their management of food [allergy](#), could improve their quality of life," says Mark Dixon, Chief Executive of Allergy New Zealand.

Solid prevalence data on [food allergy](#) in New Zealand is not available, however based on international estimates it is likely to be around 5 percent of the population overall, with higher rates in children under 5 years (up to 10 percent). Data also indicates food allergies have been increasing in prevalence over the last 20-30 years. Hospital admissions for [food](#)-induced anaphylaxis (a life-threatening allergic reaction) have also increased, with admissions in children increasing a near 3-fold in the 10 years to 2015; and 1.7 fold in adults in a similar time frame.

More information: Tamlin S. Conner et al. The Role of Personality in Daily Food Allergy Experiences, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00029](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00029)

Provided by University of Otago

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