

Food allergies leave parents living in fear

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Parents of children with food allergies face significant worry, severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress—according to new research from the University of East Anglia.

Between six and eight per cent of [children](#) suffer a food allergy—with eggs, milk, and peanuts being the most common causes. They can cause vomiting, cramps, hives, swelling, eczema, breathing problems and in severe cases anaphylactic shock, which can lead to hospitalisation or death.

A new study published today finds that more than 80 per cent of parents face 'significant worry' about their child's food allergy, while 42 per cent met the clinical cut-off for post-[traumatic stress](#) symptoms (PTSS) and 39 per cent reported moderate to extremely [severe anxiety](#).

Parents whose children have had to have an adrenaline auto-injector (for example an Epipen) administered were seven times more likely to experience PTSS.

Judith Young, from UEA's Norwich Medical School and Addenbrooke's Hospital, noticed in her work as an Honorary Consultant Clinical Psychologist that parents were describing psychological distress related to their child's allergy, but that there was little research into this.

Dr. Kate Roberts carried out the study as part of her doctoral thesis at UEA, in collaboration with Judith Young,

Dr. Alex Brightwell from Norfolk and Norwich University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Prof Richard Meiser-Stedman, from UEA's Norwich Medical School.

Dr. Roberts said: "Caring for a child with a food allergy can be really challenging—not least because they can be exposed to the foods they are allergic to, even with very careful management.

"We wanted to see how the parents of children with food allergies were affected by anxiety, worry and PTSS. And we also evaluated whether the level of anxiety and stress experienced was linked to factors such as the severity of the child's allergy."

A total of 105 parents of children with medically diagnosed food allergies completed online questionnaires about their experiences.

Around half of the children had been rushed to hospital at least once because of an allergic reaction.

As well as considering the level of the child's allergy, the team also looked at the parents' intolerance of uncertainty—how they manage unforeseen events, like the fact that they cannot completely control their child's exposure to food they're allergic to.

They also assessed the parents' 'self efficacy' - their confidence in allergy management.

Dr. Roberts, who now works at Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital King's Lynn, said: "We found that a large proportion of the parents—81 per cent—reported clinically significant worry and 42 per cent reported significant trauma symptoms related to their child's food allergy.

"Parents who reported their child to have had an adrenaline auto-injector (AAI) administered, were around seven times more likely to report clinically significant PTSS.

"Greater intolerance of uncertainty and lower food allergy self-efficacy were associated with poorer psychological outcomes. But we found 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.

"This really highlights the need for greater awareness about the mental health problems that parents of children with food allergies may be experiencing.

"Knowing which factors could predict different psychological outcomes is important because it could help identify those [parents](#) who may be struggling with their [mental health](#) and help them overcome some of the problems they may be experiencing," she added.

Dr. Alex Brightwell, Consultant Paediatrician, said: "I am delighted to have had the opportunity to work with UEA in this important area to contribute to an emerging body of evidence and ongoing research about the impact of food allergies on families. Anxiety and worry about having a child with [food](#) allergies is something we are seeing on a day to day basis. We are looking forward to working with UEA on further research to develop tools to support families affected by [food allergy](#)."

More information: 'Parental Anxiety and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Pediatric Food Allergy' *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, March 11, 2021.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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