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FOOD ALLERGY: CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS AND DIETARY APPROACHES IN CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Sobirjonova Shakhzodakhon G‘offorjon kizi
Assistant at the Fergana Medical Institute of Public Health

Abstract
This review summarizes current knowledge on the pathophysiology, clinical features, diagnosis, and management of food allergies. IgE-mediated reactions to common allergens such as milk, eggs, peanuts, and shellfish can range from mild symptoms to anaphylaxis. Diagnosis involves patient history, IgE testing, and food challenges. Management includes allergen avoidance, emergency preparedness, and education. New therapies like oral and epicutaneous immunotherapy show promise. The review highlights evidence-based strategies and the need for further research to improve care and quality of life.

Keywords: Food allergy, anaphylaxis, immunoglobulin E, oral immunotherapy, dietary management, pediatric allergy, epinephrine.

Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving healthcare landscape, food allergies have emerged as one of the most pressing public health challenges affecting millions of individuals worldwide. The prevalence of food allergic reactions has demonstrated a remarkable increase over the past three decades, with current estimates suggesting that approximately eight percent of children and four percent of adults in developed countries experience clinically significant food allergies. This upward trend has been particularly pronounced in Western nations, where environmental factors, dietary patterns, and lifestyle modifications may contribute to enhanced sensitization to common food proteins. The clinical significance of food allergies extends far beyond simple dietary restrictions, encompassing complex immunological processes that can result in severe systemic reactions requiring immediate emergency intervention. Unlike food intolerances, which typically involve enzymatic deficiencies or non-immunological mechanisms, true food allergies involve specific immune system recognition of food proteins as foreign substances, triggering cascade reactions that can affect multiple organ systems simultaneously. The economic burden associated with food allergies represents a substantial healthcare cost, with annual expenditures reaching billions of dollars globally when considering direct medical costs, pharmaceutical interventions, specialized dietary products, and indirect costs related to missed work or school days. Furthermore, the psychological impact on affected individuals and their families cannot be understated, as constant vigilance regarding food intake and social situations creates ongoing stress and anxiety that significantly affects quality of life measures.

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MAIN BODY

Food allergic reactions manifest through complex immunological pathways primarily involving immunoglobulin E-mediated hypersensitivity responses, though non-immunoglobulin E-mediated mechanisms also contribute to certain clinical presentations. The initial sensitization phase occurs when genetically predisposed individuals encounter specific food proteins, leading to antigen processing by dendritic cells and subsequent T-helper cell activation. This cascade results in B-cell differentiation and specific immunoglobulin E antibody production, which binds to high-affinity receptors on mast cells and basophils throughout the body. Upon subsequent exposure to the offending allergen, cross-linking of surface-bound immunoglobulin E antibodies triggers rapid degranulation of inflammatory cells, releasing mediators including histamine, leukotrienes, prostaglandins, and platelet-activating factor. These chemical mediators produce the characteristic symptoms associated with food allergic reactions, ranging from localized skin manifestations to systemic cardiovascular collapse. Clinical presentations demonstrate remarkable variability in both severity and organ system involvement. Cutaneous symptoms represent the most common initial manifestation, typically appearing within minutes to hours following allergen exposure. These may include localized urticaria, angioedema affecting the face and extremities, generalized erythema, and pruritic skin reactions. Gastrointestinal symptoms frequently accompany cutaneous manifestations and can include nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramping, and diarrhea, particularly in pediatric populations. Respiratory involvement ranges from mild upper airway symptoms such as rhinorrhea and sneezing to severe lower respiratory tract reactions including bronchospasm, wheezing, and acute respiratory distress. Laryngeal edema represents a particularly dangerous complication that can rapidly progress to complete airway obstruction requiring emergency surgical intervention. Cardiovascular manifestations typically occur in severe systemic reactions and may include tachycardia, hypotension, arrhythmias, and circulatory shock. These symptoms result from widespread vasodilation, increased vascular permeability, and reduced cardiac output secondary to mediator release and fluid redistribution. Anaphylaxis represents the most severe form of food allergic reaction, characterized by rapid onset of multi-system involvement that can progress to cardiovascular collapse and death within minutes. Current diagnostic criteria require involvement of two or more organ systems or isolated cardiovascular symptoms following known allergen exposure. The biphasic nature of anaphylaxis, where initial symptoms may resolve only to recur hours later, emphasizes the importance of prolonged observation and appropriate emergency preparedness.

Contemporary epidemiological studies reveal striking variations in food allergy prevalence across different geographic regions, age groups, and socioeconomic populations. Developed nations consistently demonstrate higher rates of food allergic sensitization compared to developing countries, suggesting environmental factors play crucial roles in disease development. The hygiene hypothesis proposes that reduced early-life microbial exposure in sanitized environments may predispose individuals to allergic sensitization through altered immune system development. Pediatric populations show the highest incidence of new food allergies, with most reactions developing during the first two years of life when dietary diversification typically occurs. Milk and egg allergies predominate in infancy and early childhood, with many children achieving tolerance through natural desensitization processes by school age. However, allergies to peanuts,

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tree nuts, fish, and shellfish frequently persist into adulthood and may actually increase in severity over time. Genetic predisposition plays a fundamental role in food allergy development, with family history representing the strongest individual risk factor. Children with one allergic parent demonstrate approximately twenty-five percent risk of developing allergic conditions, while those with two affected parents face risks approaching fifty percent. Specific genetic polymorphisms affecting immune regulation, epithelial barrier function, and inflammatory pathways have been identified as contributing factors. Environmental influences during critical developmental windows significantly impact allergic sensitization risk. Delayed introduction of potentially allergenic foods beyond six months of age, previously recommended as protective, has now been associated with increased allergy development. Current evidence supports early introduction of peanut-containing foods between four to six months of age in high-risk infants to prevent sensitization. Concurrent atopic conditions including eczema, asthma, and allergic rhinitis demonstrate strong associations with food allergies, suggesting shared pathophysiological mechanisms. The atopic march describes the typical progression from early eczema to food allergies, followed by respiratory allergic conditions in many affected children.

Accurate food allergy diagnosis requires comprehensive clinical evaluation combining detailed history taking, appropriate laboratory testing, and when indicated, supervised food challenge procedures. The diagnostic process begins with thorough documentation of suspected reactions, including specific foods consumed, timing of symptom onset, symptom characteristics and duration, treatments administered, and potential cofactors such as concurrent medications, alcohol consumption, or exercise. Serum-specific immunoglobulin E testing provides valuable objective evidence of allergic sensitization to particular food proteins. Modern assays can detect and quantify antibodies to specific allergen components, offering enhanced diagnostic precision compared to traditional whole-food extracts. However, positive test results must be interpreted within clinical context, as sensitization does not invariably predict clinical reactivity. Skin prick tests offer rapid assessment of immunoglobulin E-mediated sensitization through direct application of food extracts to superficially punctured skin. Positive reactions typically appear within fifteen minutes as localized wheal and flare responses. While highly sensitive, skin testing may produce false positive results in individuals with extensive eczema or those taking antihistamine medications. Component-resolved diagnostics represents an advanced testing approach that measures antibodies to specific allergenic proteins within foods, providing insights into cross-reactivity patterns and potential reaction severity. For example, sensitization to stable storage proteins like Ara h 1, 2, and 3 in peanuts correlates with higher risk of severe systemic reactions compared to sensitization to heat-labile proteins. Oral food challenges remain the gold standard for definitive food allergy diagnosis, particularly when history and testing provide conflicting information. These procedures must be conducted in specialized medical facilities with immediate access to emergency medications and resuscitation equipment. Challenges involve gradually increasing doses of the suspected allergen under close medical supervision, allowing for objective assessment of clinical reactivity. Elimination diets may provide additional diagnostic information when coupled with systematic reintroduction protocols. However, prolonged unnecessary dietary restrictions can result in nutritional deficiencies and social limitations, emphasizing the importance of accurate diagnosis before implementing avoidance measures.

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Effective dietary management of food allergies requires comprehensive patient education, careful meal planning, and ongoing nutritional monitoring to prevent both allergic reactions and nutritional deficiencies. Complete avoidance of identified allergens represents the cornerstone of management, necessitating thorough understanding of food labeling, cross-contamination risks, and hidden allergen sources. Food labeling regulations in most developed countries require clear identification of major allergens in packaged products, though regulations vary internationally. Patients must be educated to recognize alternative names for allergenic ingredients and understand terms indicating potential allergen presence such as "may contain" or "produced in facilities that also process" warnings. Cross-contamination prevention requires systematic approaches to food preparation, storage, and service. Shared cooking surfaces, utensils, and oil for frying can transfer sufficient allergen quantities to trigger reactions in highly sensitive individuals. Restaurant dining presents particular challenges, requiring communication with kitchen staff regarding ingredient lists and preparation methods. Nutritional assessment and monitoring become essential when major food groups are eliminated from the diet. Milk allergy in children requires careful attention to calcium, vitamin D, and protein intake, while wheat avoidance necessitates evaluation of B-vitamin and fiber consumption. Registered dietitians specializing in food allergies provide invaluable guidance for maintaining balanced nutrition while avoiding trigger foods. Specialized food products designed for allergic individuals have expanded significantly, offering alternatives that closely approximate conventional foods in taste and nutritional content. However, these products often carry higher costs and may not be readily available in all geographic areas, creating access disparities for affected families. Emergency preparedness education represents a critical component of dietary management, ensuring patients and caregivers understand when and how to administer epinephrine auto-injectors. Action plans should be developed for various settings including home, school, workplace, and social situations, with clear instructions for recognizing allergic reactions and appropriate response measures.

Management of food allergies in pediatric populations requires specialized approaches that account for developmental, nutritional, and psychosocial factors unique to growing children. Infants and young children cannot communicate symptoms effectively, necessitating heightened caregiver awareness of behavioral changes, feeding difficulties, and physical signs that may indicate allergic reactions. Nutritional requirements during periods of rapid growth make dietary restrictions particularly concerning in pediatric patients. Elimination of major food groups can significantly impact caloric intake, protein quality, and essential nutrient consumption if not carefully managed. Growth monitoring through regular height and weight measurements helps identify potential nutritional deficiencies early in the management process. School environments present unique challenges for children with food allergies, requiring coordination between families, educational staff, and healthcare providers. Comprehensive school management plans should address emergency medication storage and administration, cafeteria protocols, classroom activities involving food, and staff training on allergic reaction recognition and response.

Social and psychological impacts of food allergies can be particularly pronounced during childhood and adolescence when peer acceptance and social activities often revolve around shared meals. Age-appropriate education helps children understand their condition while developing confidence in self-advocacy and safe food choices. Transition to adult care requires careful

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planning and gradual assumption of self-management responsibilities. Adolescents may demonstrate risk-taking behaviors that increase exposure likelihood, necessitating ongoing education and support during this vulnerable developmental period.

Recent advances in food allergy treatment have introduced promising therapeutic options that may offer alternatives to strict dietary avoidance for select patient populations. Oral immunotherapy involves controlled administration of gradually increasing doses of the offending allergen under medical supervision, with the goal of inducing desensitization or tolerance. Clinical trials of oral immunotherapy for peanut, milk, and egg allergies have demonstrated significant efficacy in reducing reaction severity and increasing tolerance thresholds in many participants. However, treatment requires months to years of daily allergen consumption and carries risks of inducing allergic reactions during the dose escalation process. Epicutaneous immunotherapy represents an alternative approach that delivers allergens through skin patches, potentially offering improved safety profiles compared to oral routes. Early studies suggest this method may be particularly suitable for pediatric patients and those with history of severe reactions. Biologic therapies targeting specific inflammatory pathways show promise as adjunctive treatments for food allergies. Omalizumab, a monoclonal antibody that binds circulating immunoglobulin E, has been investigated as a pretreatment to enhance safety during oral immunotherapy protocols. Novel approaches including engineered probiotics, modified allergen vaccines, and combination immunotherapies are under active investigation. These treatments aim to reprogram immune responses to food allergens while minimizing treatment-related adverse effects.

The natural history of food allergies varies significantly depending on the specific allergen, age of onset, and individual patient factors. Many children with milk and egg allergies achieve tolerance through natural desensitization processes, with resolution rates exceeding eighty percent by adulthood. However, allergies to peanuts, tree nuts, fish, and shellfish typically persist throughout life and may actually increase in severity with age. Regular monitoring through periodic testing and clinical evaluation helps track disease progression and identify candidates for dietary liberalization. Supervised food challenges may be recommended when testing suggests decreased sensitization levels, allowing for safe reintroduction of previously avoided foods. Quality of life measures consistently demonstrate significant impacts of food allergies on affected individuals and their families. Constant vigilance regarding food choices, social limitations, and anxiety about potential reactions contribute to reduced quality of life scores across multiple domains. Long-term complications of poorly managed food allergies include nutritional deficiencies, social isolation, and increased healthcare utilization. Conversely, appropriate management with comprehensive education and support typically results in excellent outcomes with minimal impact on overall health and development.

In conclusion, food allergies are complex conditions that require individualized, multidisciplinary management beyond simple dietary restrictions. Their rising prevalence, especially in children, highlights the need for greater awareness and coordinated care involving allergists, primary care providers, and dietitians. While early allergen introduction may help prevent allergies, strict avoidance remains key for those affected. Emerging therapies show promise, but further research is needed. Healthcare systems must improve emergency readiness, access to care, and public safety policies to effectively manage food allergies and improve patient outcomes.

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